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KING OF BRAVES
GAOGAIGAR

Art by: **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

What's in a name?

Apparently a lot… In the hours, then days, following Nintendo's big name change from Revolution to Wii, the torrent of instant messages and emails seemed never-ending. I never considered how many jokes could be based on the term "Wii." To this day, just over a week before E3, people are still praying that it's a hoax—hoping and speculating that Nintendo would never go through with making consumers discuss how much they like their Wii. It is an odd name, especially coupled with how silly people look playing Wii, waving around the remote like they did in the backyard playing Zorro as a kid. You think you have it bad? Imagine how many times a year we refer to each system. Forums, blogs, and previews and reviews everywhere just received a silly little noun to wrestle with, and make no mistake—ridicule for as long as the system is relevant. One has to wonder what the thinking was beyond the "it's not about me, it's about Wii" slogan, because once removed from the jingle, which isn't music to every gamer's ears in the first place (did single-player gaming die? And if so why wasn't I invited to the funeral?), it becomes a silly potty word. Naming a console Wii in the US, you might as well deem it "Wiz" or "Johnson," and I have the emails to prove it.

But what's in a name? Does having to say that you've been playing the heck out of your Wii really matter when you're engaging in an innovative new way to play and interact with video games? Probably not, but if it's all the same to you, and Nintendo, I think I'll take the 5th on Wii and just use Revolution, much the same way as people still say "PSX."

Next, I received a few letters this past month about my comments on the state of the 360. Constructive criticism and "bashing" are two different things. We love our 360s as much as the next consumer but were rightfully wary of the Japan launch and the casualties of the last 24 months of game cancellations. If you'll recall, getting a 360 in America was like hitting the lotto back in November while Japan had them stacked to the ceiling. If we didn't scrutinize such miscalculations and only chimed in when things were bright, we wouldn't be much of a magazine. You also have to realize that this page doesn't necessarily reflect the feelings of the entire staff. Yeah, I'm upset over the state of platformers for Xbox and subsequently 360 but, for the most part, everyone around here seems pretty happy with their systems. Also bear in mind that over the last four years my car's been parked in the Microsoft garage much of the time… I don't think that any other US magazine has done as many Xbox covers or as much content over the past 4 years, let alone getting behind games like Gunvalkyrie, Voodoo Vince, Blinx, and Panzer Dragoon with covers. And who knows, I may be totally off base on Viva… I just really wanted another Battletoads. For all I know it could end up my game of the show; it is Rare after all.

Play speaks for itself game by game within these pages; I just try to fill this page before we close each month with whatever's on my mind. It's not a science; it's just brain droppings coming off of each three week crunch to put Play together. This industry is nothing if not a big ongoing debate. Wii cool?

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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June 2006

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LETTER OF THE MONTH

Urban decay

First, I would like to say to the staff of Play Magazine that I really enjoy the articles written in this particular magazine. They are always very articulate and well-written with what appears to be much thought and consideration.

I write this letter today to address a problem with video games that seems rarely addressed, while quite frankly, annoyed and irritated me to seemingly no end. My complaint, as an African American consumer in the video game market, is nothing as pedestrian as a lack of Black and African American characters in video games. It is the often offensive, degrading and nauseating light these characters are often portrayed in. While I am well aware of such games as "Def Jam: Vendetta", "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" and "25 to Life." However, I don't have a particular problem with these games because they are "hip-hop" and "urban"-based culture. Though it is often a negative and exaggerated portrayal of hip-hop culture, every character, no matter their race, flaunts the same sort of over-the-top demeanor and attitude.

My problem is with games that are not even remotely set against an "urban" stage, and yet their one or two Black characters stand as an example of "ebonics" gone awry. Even major companies are guilty of this insult. I.E. Capcom's Street Fighter series is a game about "World Warriors," Birdie, an Aboriginal, and Balrog, an African American, are shown as mindless, comical, strength-based thugs and underlings with no real potential. DeeJay is only slightly above his two compatriots but he is still a very sad stereotype.

Final Fantasy 7's, African American Barrett was the only character that spoke with "ebonics" in the entire game. Bushido Blade 2 featured one African American character that was a jive-talking, Afro-sporting, swordsman.

Even while video game stories and graphics have made tremendous leaps forward, African American characters still often remained muddled in poor stereotypes. All the other characters of Tecmo's DOA are designed with some of the most poise, poetic grace and strength of any title; yet "funky dude" Zack, a "self-taught Thai Boxer" is presented as comical, boorish and silly. Even a game as current and complex as Nautilus's "Shadow Hearts: From the New World" depicts what could be considered a pretty offensive and racist overtone with a Black butler calling the 16-year-old main character "Sir!"

This leaves me feeling like only the graphics of games continue to advance in leaps and bounds, yet there are apparently not enough upgrades to end the age-old stereotypes that still plague Black characters. For every Dean Shepard of Vivendi Universal's "Men of Valor", there are about 10 Bucks from Ubisoft's "187: Ride or Die."

Waler W.

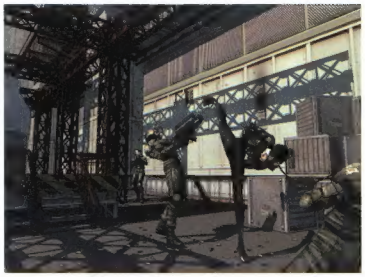
MM woes

Is it really challenging for videogame coders to program enemies to only have a 2-3' equivalent attack range? My main gripe with MMORPGS is that if I realize in the middle of a battle that I'm screwed, and decide to run away, 10+ yards out, I'm still getting hit by a monster that is no where in sight. Why don't playable characters have this sort of range? All other gripes have to do with having to play games with 10-year-old kids, but programmers can't do anything about that, other than not procreating, but 'nerds' need lovin' too... although birth control is an amazing thing...

Mr. G.

Strident

I've written pretty much ever magazine even remotely linked to video games, combed the web and even tried contacting Phantagram in Korea…but no matter what I do I can't seem to find anyone who knows the fate or status of the game Strident. I've written you twice on the subject and finally noticed that someone else had asked about it too. Are there more people like me out there that can't seem to stop thinking about this game? Which leads me to my next question. Why do publishers give you screen shots and information about exciting games, especially ones that look this amazing and then just drop it when there is delay, cancellation, or whatever. It's not fair to leave the public hanging and it's not exactly like it would be that much trouble. I know Phantagram is still doing well, so they're still out there and I would think working on some Xbox 360 games. Is Strident one of them? I figure since you did a cover story on Magna Carta you must have some contacts in Korea…



Strident...looking as amazing as ever.

"Nerds need lovin' too...although birth control is an amazing thing..."

while you're at it (if you reply at all) I'd also like to know what ever happened to BC. It was by far one of my most anticipated Xbox games (you guys covered it like 5 or 6 times) and it was very close to release (a UK magazine I have even did a cover) and then it just went away. How can Microsoft do that and not make some kind of announcement? If it is still around what better time to finish it for a release. There are barely any good Xbox games coming out and I don't own a next generation console yet. I love my Xbox! If Strident and BC are being made for Xbox 360 now perhaps I'll step up but for now I like the lower price games and still think the technology is pretty great. Just look at Conker or Splinter cell. Anyway, you're my last hope. Please help.

Lyle C.

We get at least a few Strident letters every month and are hoping to track down Phantagram at E3 so stay tuned. Perhaps BC will resurface too. Can't see letting all of that development go to waste. In the meantime here are some assets to hold you over…

It's hard out there for gamer

There is a problem with the game industry. There is too much of a good thing to go around and not enough people to support it. Remember Psychonauts? I wanted to buy the game; however there was God of War, Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition, Gran Turismo 4, DOOM 3, and Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory to consider also. I got four out of the five I just mentioned and I didn't get another game until Medal of Honor: European Assault came out. What I am saying is that this was Spring. I couldn't get every game I wanted even then, so when Fall came, I could only get Half-Life 2 and Capcom Classics Collection. The reason some companies go out of business is because the consumers can't keep up with the product that is released. The only way I could get some of the games that I couldn't get previously was to wait until they were budget priced. Psychonauts has been out a year and it is still not budget priced. Once it is, I will certainly pick it up. Besides gaming, there is plenty of merchandise consumers are asked to buy (movies, books, magazines, music, etc.) and that is just entertainment. We have an overwhelming amount of choice and it is getting more difficult to select what we want with the limited amount of funds we have. Instead of a game, I might have to settle for a tank of gas. Not exactly exciting is it? What was exciting though was the launch of the PS2. The letter from Michael in the May 2006 issue indicated a lack of quality software during the initial six months. Not only could I find a system but the following games gave me a lot to be proud of following my new purchases – Ridge Racer V, SSX, Midnight Club, Tekken Tag Tournament, Smuggler's Run, TimeSplitters, Gradius III & IV, Unreal Tournament, Sky Odyssey, ATV Offroad Fury, Onimusha: Warlords, MDK 2: Armageddon, Rumble Racing, Zone of the Enders, Red Faction, Dark Cloud, Tokyo Extreme Racer Zero, and Coolboarders 2001. Not bad games at all. The Xbox 360 has been out for almost six months and it also has its share of great games. The problem (to this day) is finding a system to play those great games on. Luckily, I have plenty of games from the past for all the other systems that I can rely on to make me happy.

Collin

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ink

Wii quote of the month....

by Nick Des Barres

"You will remember Wii. You will remember Wii until the day you die. And that's exactly what Nintendo wants. In three years "Wii" will just be another one of those quirky, meaningless brand names Nintendo is so fond of comparing it to -- Yahoo!, Google, et al. Is it fourteen flavors of ridiculous? Yes. But is it memorable? Boy howdy. In this business, what matters is mindshare, and Nintendo just gobbled up a bunch."

Wii the people...

Only Nintendo could get away with dropping a name like "Wii" on us just weeks prior to their long awaited, much anticipated system debut...or can they? According to our online poll the decision isn't all that popular, and speculation that perhaps it's all just a silly prank to steal the pre-show spotlight is dwindling.

The results of our online Wii poll as of May 1st

15%	Great Name!
12%	It's okay
15%	Uhh...What?
46%	Should keep "Revolution"
11%	Not getting one/don't care either way

Sega Rally Revo

How does a truly next-gen Sega Rally strike you? Developed as the first game out of newly formed SEGA Driving Studio for PS3, Xbox 360 and PC, Sega Rally Revo will employ dynamically deformable terrain that Sega is touting as "revolutionary." Affected by the forceful impact of your car and the weather itself, track condition and physical attributes will change as races progress. From snow to gravel to pavement, courses will be constantly in flux, forcing you to pay very close attention to the type of vehicle you choose to take out. The AI drivers will also learn to adapt to changing conditions.

Indiana Jones

The scenario: a moving bridge tosses characters around, causing them to stumble, lose balance and attempt to catch themselves as the platform continues to sway unpredictably. Whether they fall or survive, how they finally stable themselves is not scripted, and the outcome could be different every time. The technology advancing this possibility is known as the euphoria behavioral-simulation engine from NaturalMotion Ltd., and only two companies apparently have early access to it. One such company is LucasArts, who will be using this next-gen approach to animation in their forthcoming Indiana Jones game. "With euphoria, A.I. drives character behaviors so that there's a different payoff every time. The depth of this character interaction gives us true next-gen gameplay that you simply couldn't do with earlier generations of hardware," said Peter Hirschmann, vice president of product development at LucasArts. "We've been working with NaturalMotion since 2004 to help bring their groundbreaking technology to games, and there's no better character to demonstrate it than Indiana Jones."

Beep Beep!

Industries that is

Last month in counting down the casualties of the Xbox's platformer core, we mentioned Beep Industries who is not "dead" (figure of speech—whoops) but in a cocoon state waiting to cast their next spell. Meanwhile Voodoo Vince fans continue to be vocal (and crafty) in the hopes of meeting the wise-cracking voodoo doll once again (see some of their creations below). Our friend, Beep Pres. Clayton Kauzlaric elaborates. . . . "Beep Industries is still alive. We've managed to keep a core group employed by creating downloadable PC games. That has turned out to be a very cool market, and a way to explore some interesting game concepts. Meanwhile, we are working to get back into the console arena. We have some concepts we're shopping and a demo in the works. Pitching an original IP like Vince was tough back in 2000/2001. It took almost a year to land a deal. We're finding the atmosphere even less receptive now, so it's hard to say when we'll be building a substantial console title again. Still, we'll keep at it. It's what we love, and frankly there is nothing we'd rather be doing -- in spite of the uphill battle Beep has faced since our days as a 1st-party developer." You can check out their latest "Zodiac" on MSN's game zone (check the Vince sound effects!). Our vote is for a 2D Vince platformer on Live Arcade.

Now that's fandom. C'mon Microsoft!

Man shoots at son's computer

Warning: you might want to bullet-proof your gaming rig if Dad's been getting a little annoyed with your gaming habits. The advice would've served 22-year-old Tim Langenderfer of Dunedin, Florida quite well, as he called 911 after his pops sent a slug sailing through past the PC, nailing the wall as the son sat nearby. As originally reported in Tampa Bay's 10 News, father Joseph claimed his boy was neglecting responsibilities and spending way too much time hanging out at his game station.

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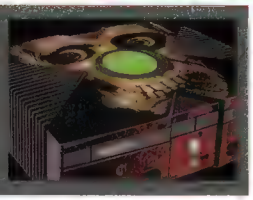
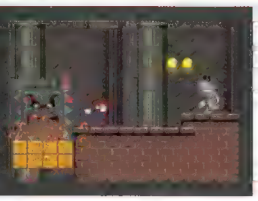


New Super Mario Bros.
Nintendo/NDS

The first original Mario action game since Super Mario 64. Truly an event for DS fans.



GTA: Liberty City Stories
Rockstar / PS2

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	Virgin Megastore Top Ten
01	**Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories** 2K / PS2
02	**FIFA World Cup 2006** EA / PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360, NGC, NDS, GBA
03	**Final Fantasy XI** Square Enix / Xbox 360
04	**Major League Baseball 2K6** 2K / Xbox 360, PSP
05	**The Da Vinci Code** 2K Games PS2, Xbox
06	**New Super Mario Bros.** Nintendo / NDS
07	**Tomb Raider: Legend** Eidos / PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360
08	**Hitman Bloodmoney** Eidos / PS2, Xbox
09	**X3** Activision / PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360, NGC, NDS, GBA
10	**Kingdom Hearts II** Square Enix / PS2

Kingdom Hearts 2

Final Fantasy XI

	NPD Group Top Ten March Game Sales
01	**Kingdom Hearts II** Square Enix / PS2
02	**Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter** Ubisoft / Xbox360
03	**Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion** Take 2 / Xbox 360
04	**Black** EA / PS2
05	**MLB 06 the Show** SCEA / PS2
06	**Fight Night Round 3** EA/ PS2
07	**Black** EA / Xbox
08	**The Godfather: The Game** EA/ PS2
09	**Fight Night Round 3** EA/ Xbox 360
10	**God of War** SCEA/ PS2

Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter

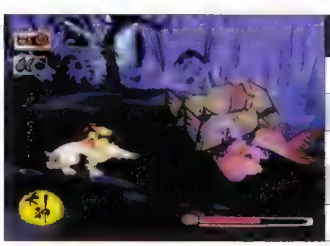
Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

Play Editor and Reader Picks

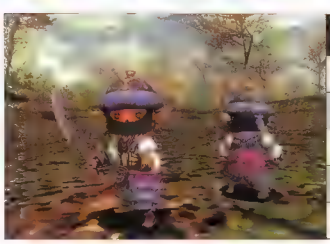
	Dave Halverson
01	**Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins** Capcom / PSP
02	**New Super Mario Bros.** Nintendo / NDS
03	**Death Jr. 2 The Root of Evil** Konami / PSP
04	**Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion** 2K / Xbox 360
05	**Three Wonders** (Capcom Classics) Capcom / PSP

	Brady Fiechter
01	**Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion** 2K / Xbox 360
02	**New Super Mario Bros.** Nintendo / NDS
03	**Dead Rising** Capcom / Xbox 360
04	**Brain Age** Nintendo / NDS
05	**Tetris DS** Nintendo / NDS

	Greg Orlando
01	**Mario Superstar Baseball** Nintendo / GC
02	**The Outfit** THQ / Xbox 360
03	**Tomb Raider: Legend** Eidos / Xbox 360
04	**Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter** Ubisoft / Xbox 360
05	**Battlefield 2: Modern Combat EA** / Xbox 360



	Casey Loe
01	**Okami** Capcom / PS2
02	**Final Fantasy XII** Square Enix / PS2
03	**Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion** 2K / Xbox 360
04	**Yggdra Union** Capcom Sting/ GBA
05	**Baten Kaitos II** Nintendo / GC



	Nick Des Barres
01	**Final Fantasy XI: ToAU** Square Enix / Xbox 360
02	**Final Fantasy XII** Square Enix / PS2
03	**Okami** Capcom / PS2
04	**Ninety-Nine-Nights** Microsoft / Xbox 360
05	**Clash at Demonhead** Vic Tokai / NES

	Michael Hobbs
01	**New Super Mario Bros.** Nintendo / DS
02	**Tetris DS** Nintendo / DS
03	**Brain Age** Nintendo / DS
04	**Dead Rising** Capcom / Xbox 360
05	**Super Princess Peach** Nintendo / DS

	Eric Patterson
01	**Brain Age** Nintendo / NDS
02	**Legend of Heroes II** Namco Bandai / PSP
03	**Field Commander** SOE /PSP
04	**Castlevania DoS** Nintendo /NDS
05	**Romance of the Three Kingdoms X** Koei/PS2

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Death, Jr. 2: The Root of Evil

+

Death, Jr. and the Science Fair of Doom

words Dave Halverson

There's no denying America's fascination with death. Slasher and zombie films (often of dubious quality) score big at the box office and network TV is chock-full of more cadavers than the local morgue in San Andreas. The only thing we seem to like more than dead people is a good demon possession. Add religion to the mix and we're all the more captivated. Satan gets top billing in the good old US of A: from *The Exorcist* to *Rosemary's Baby* to *Hellboy* to *Constantine* if it has pious implications and latex or CGI, sign us up. And why not? Make believe malevolence is, after all, the most fun you can have with your pants on, which is why it's second only to internet porn.

For all of the play that Satan gets, however, the grim reaper doesn't get much respect at all. Bill & Ted let him tag along on their bogus journey, and Billy and Mandy have provided him with a plucky earthbound home, but on the whole we don't see much of Death until it's too late to really get to know him, and I think I know why…

Hell—as hot and effects-laden as it may be depending on which interpretation you choose (I prefer the *Little Nicky* version over the *Constantine* or *Spawn* rendition)—

represents everlasting life on arguably the more desirable of the two spiritual planes. Heaven's bound to be a drag if the likes of TV evangelists are holding tickets (I'd much rather party with rock stars) while the reaper represents the cold, hard reality of death, and there's certainly no fun in that (at least that anyone is aware of). Which is why the Death Jr. saga is long overdue: It's high-time somebody revealed the softer side of the Grim Reaper, and what better way than through the eyes of his only son—little DJ.

Turns out our Death isn't such a bad guy after all: He's got a beautiful wife, lives in a beautiful house, has an affinity for hash browns, and most of all loves his little boy in all of his undead Terrance and Phillip glory. People often ask why I'm so enamored with the whole "DJ thing." The answer is simple: Death Jr. epitomizes everything that's fun and Halloween camp about the dark side, but at the same time is wonderfully unpleasant, much like the relationship between Wednesday and Pugsley Addams. Everything DJ touches dies, and his school playmates are the quintessential gaggle of super freaks. It's what great games are made of.

For the uninitiated, it all began on DJ's first day of High School when he met conjoined twins Smith and Weston—a genius on one side with a buffoon on the other; the timid Stigmartha, a pencil-thin botanist, pale as a ghost from bleeding from her hands when she gets nervous; the Seep, a lipless malformed torso with a bad attitude floating in a test tube on tank treads; and Pandora, a curious fun-loving goth princess with coal black eyes and a proclivity for opening sealed boxes. In the first game—an abbreviated version of the graphic novel—the gang sidled into a hidden vault during a field trip to the museum of supernatural history where Pandora, unable to leave well-enough alone, unwittingly released Moloch, the ultimate evil, who also happened to be DJ's uncle. In Death Jr. 2 we find them in much the same predicament...

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Backbone	Available	Fall

Death, Jr. 2

The Root of Evil

Dawn of the dead

Apparently, old habits die hard (if at all) as DJ and Pandora have once again unleashed a great evil, this time awakening an evil dryad-like creature—Furi—from her cocooned state, bringing about a series of events that not only threatens their small town, but even puts DJ's dad in danger. Enraged that she's been awakened before her transformation into the ultimate force of evil is complete, Furi starts off as a small waif-like villain but grows in power by sucking the life force out of humans and forest creatures; she even has the ability to control the forces of nature and bring inanimate objects to life. After DJ & friends extinguish everything at their disposal to stop her (including secret military weapon-grade chemicals) in the end, there's only one substance known to man deadly enough to exterminate a pest of this magnitude...Seep Juice! The horror.

Destroy giant robots as either DJ or Pandora.

Backbone began shaping Death, Jr. 2: The Root of Evil by first listening to players, and where it seemed appropriate, improving on certain aspects of the initial design, most notably the camera. The original camera was an acquired taste that the dimensionally-challenged never acquired, where about-facing involved snapping the camera behind DJ with the L trigger while the R trigger locked him into strafe/lock-on stance...great for shooting, but not so great for close quarters platforming. The new camera is decidedly more organic, giving the player spin-control via L and R with strafing toggled on and off by tapping the triangle button. Lock-on is now automatic and proximity-sensitive; jumping, melee, dodging, and ranged combat are on the usual buttons and weapons-toggling has been reassigned to double-taps on the D-pad. I don't normally find it necessary to disseminate control schemes but in this case, since so many seemed at odds with the initial system, it bears noting.

Moving on to more exciting ground, there is much to celebrate in pretty much every facet of the game, beginning with the new multi-player mode which lets two players go through the entire game simultaneously. Normally not a huge fan of two-player action, I found this aspect of DJ2 almost illegally entertaining given that each player has complete autonomy. Once the host picks either DJ or Pandora (she is a completely addictive character by the way) the second player can select from an array of new playable characters and then into the ether you both go. Once initiated, two-player games must be played all the way through in co-op (as the balance is of

> "Normally not a huge fan of two-player action, I found this aspect almost illegally entertaining..."

course tweaked to accommodate the extra firepower) and so it's almost like you're getting two games in one as things take on a decidedly different feel playing over Wi-Fi as opposed to by your lonesome. Backbone has also augmented the moveset considerably, adding a reverse jump, jump attack, and a much-needed block, endowed Pandora with a retractile whip (which acts a lot like DJ's scythe—only with a hint of Belmont) and added three tiers of attack potency. Refined would be an understatement in terms of both the gameplay and new play-mechanics.

As the first-ever PSP character-action game (announced well before the system launched), Death Jr. set a pretty high standard in terms of expanse, view distance, and especially loading times—and as groundbreaking as it was, it has been respectively enhanced. The new engine is a wonder to behold, incorporating a smoother frame rate, even larger expanses that exhibit finer detail, significantly better textures, and lighting techniques that take PSP effects to a whole new level via light sources that cast

"How to deal with such a mass of evil? With lots of new guns, of course..."

Fun with lighting

with DJ2 Producer Chris Charla

HDR lighting, aka High Dynamic Range, is a feature usually associated with next-generation platforms, or high-end PCs. Basically, instead of having a fixed number of intensities for color and lighting—usually 8-bits/256 intensities for each of the three color channels (red, green and blue)—with HDR, we have much more granularity available.

In real-time, we detect the brightest element of the screen the player can see (and that the screen can display), and the darkest value the player can see (and that the screen can display), and we dynamically adjust the available color range on-screen to match that. So you get much brighter brights, and much darker darks, and a world that is lit much more vibrantly.

On DJ1, and in almost every PSP game to date, you had fixed intensity lighting. With HDR, we can create much more dramatic lighting and do things like, when Pandora walks out of a dark area into a bright one, the whole screen goes extremely bright for a short period. It basically simulates the way actual human eyes react to light, and creates a way-more immersive world.

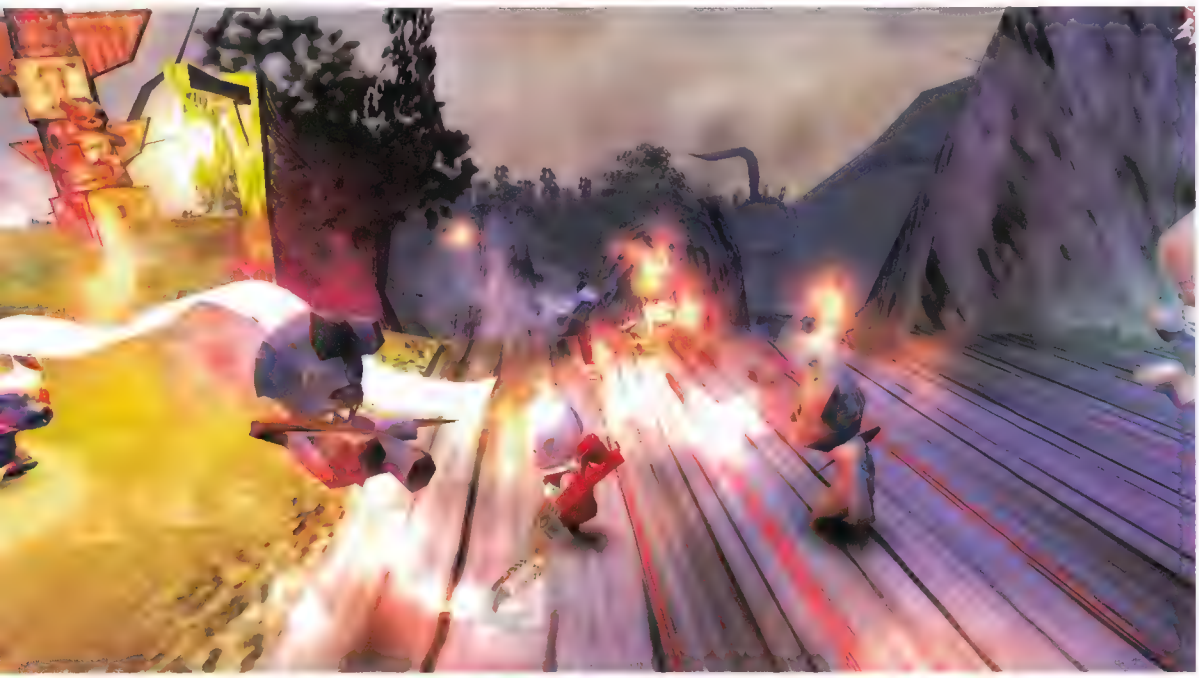
The same graphic systems we implemented to enable HDR also give us a huge number of other effects, like light blooms, motion blur, something we call "egg crate" (you'll see it in World of Waffles after you get gassed...), and also the ability to switch "camera lenses" on the fly. So we can go from a standard camera to a fish-eye lens and back.

When you're playing, this will all be pretty seamless; we don't want people to be like "oh my, look at that technically impressive lighting and camera code!," but the net effect will be that DJ2PSP is going to just be very much more dramatic looking, which will go great with the crazy-cool geometry the team is cooking up.

a gradual degree of brightness as you approach objects. The models are also markedly better (Pandora is especially fluid) and the enemies look and move much better than before. There are also lots more of them in DJ 2 (Animatronic Llama, Bitter Chicken, Action Hero, Topiary Griffin, Cleaner, Carnivorous Coniferous, Hairless Rat, Gorilla Guard, Spider Doll, Roach, and Tree Bug to name a few) with variations on each. How to deal with such a mass of evil? With lots of new guns of course, and Smith and Weston have been busy, working on Pandora's Tommy Gun, Shiny Sparklies, and Proximity Gas Mines along with DJ's all new Icer and my personal favorite, the Flaming TP Launcher, which fires a trail of exploding toilet paper! While the story conjures visions of Poison Ivy's leafy lair, the game has a decidedly diverse set of levels. Things begin in the forest, but segue into the most bizarre assortment of level designs since Earthworm Jim, right down to a food level (Waffle House World) that harkens back to EWJ 2's breakfast scramble. My initial concern was that the dark continuity of DJ's world would be diminished by such blatant diversions, however they are suitably evil and do work in accord with the story. Toy cemeteries, llama farms, saw mills, an underground military base, and the mall may not sound like such daunting levels of doom, but the rabbit hole here is practically a bottomless pit. Things are less room-to-room in DJ2 with certain expanses taking on lives of their own, far beyond exterminating a set number of enemies and moving on. Widgets are no more, nor are eyeball-laden demon doors. DJ 2 is more focused on puzzle-action, platforming, and, of course, ranged attacks, although melee factors in way more and the enemy AI is much the wiser. Once spotted, certain enemies (such as lab rats) will take chase and stay on your tail, even leaping across platforms in pursuit. Running away isn't nearly as effective a strategy this time around. Those pesky neon wires have been overhauled too, as well as textured. Also gone is the hub—the old three-portal-per-area warps replaced by massive stages laden with checkpoint saves. Cut-scenes—featuring an actual script—link it all together and if you liked the music in the first game (and if you didn't, how's that new Clay Aiken CD treating you?) prepare to be even more swept away than before. Yes, it's possible.

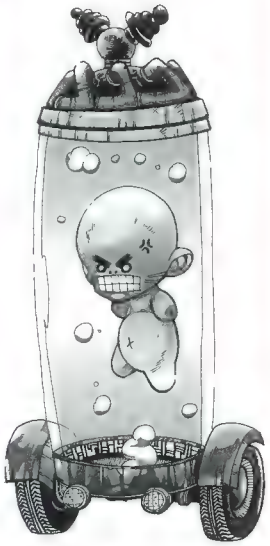
Death Jr: Action Figures

Gentle Giant is on the case and they're looking better than ever. Aside from the usual suspects (you have a C4 hamster yes?) check out Stigmartha and DJ's dad. Stigmartha is still being tweaked a bit but Death is pretty much final. He's not aging a bit!



Death Jr. Manga

Although the story is still in the developmental stages, what we do know is that the manga features Pandora, who unlocks a door to the future in order to save DJ from an evil girlfriend. Two big shockers here. Number one of course—Pandora's kind of hot and number two...DJ gets a girlfriend?



System(s)	NDS	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Backbone Vancouver	Available	Fall

Death, Jr. and the Science Fair of Doom

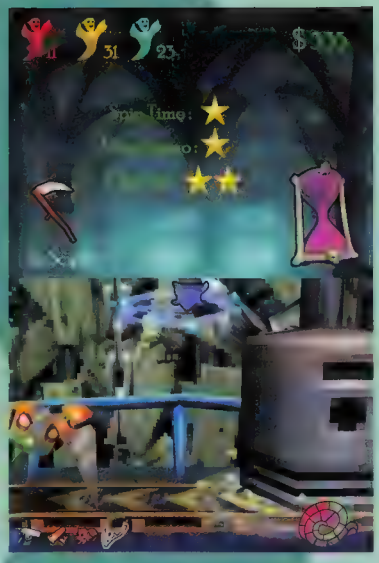
Academically evil

Developed by Backbone's Vancouver Studio, Science Fair of Doom is a completely unique game created to vaunt stylus play as well as push players' sanity envelope as only those crazy Canucks can (eh?), creating a game unlike any current action romp available for the DS.

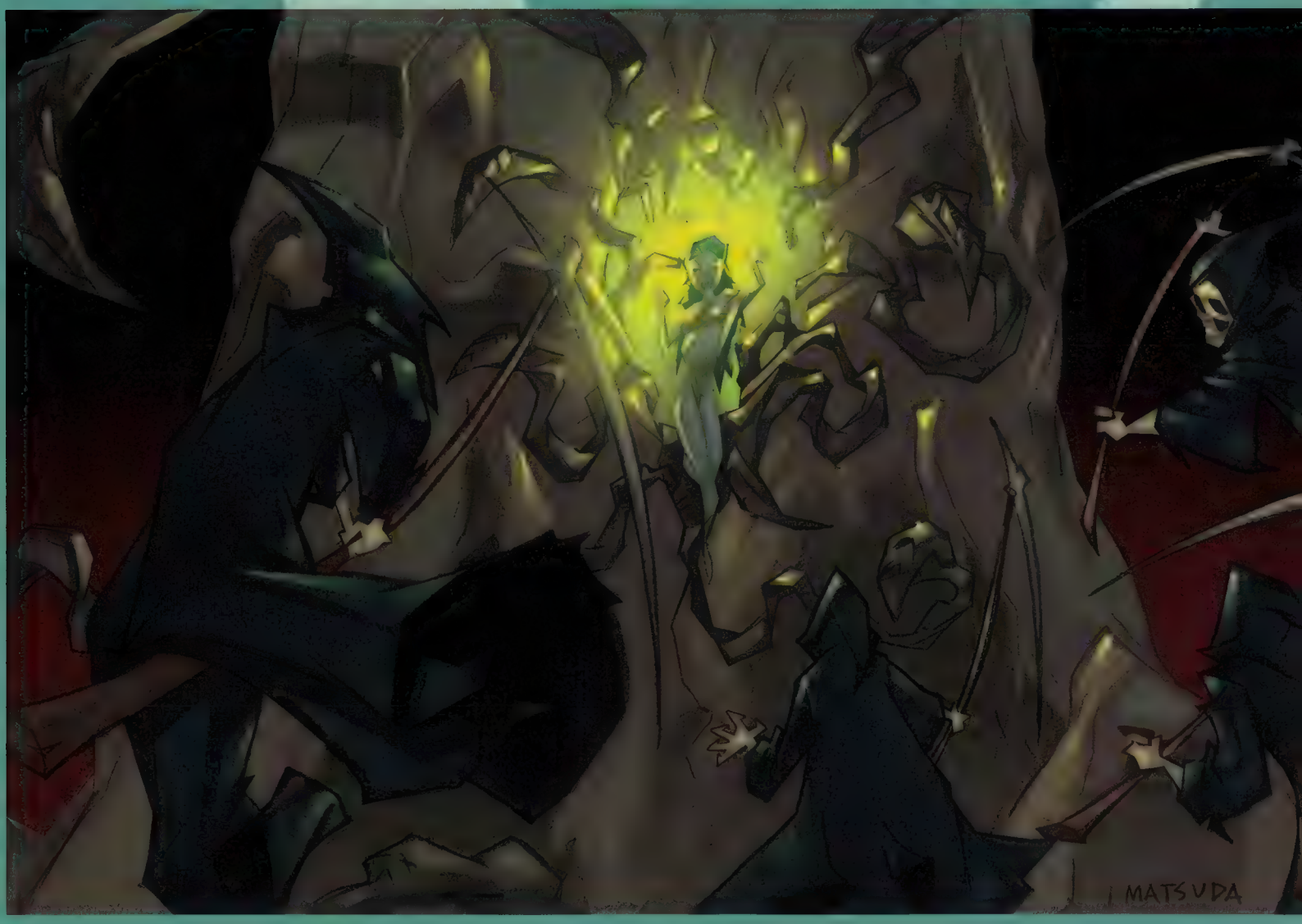
The game opens by way of the High School Science Fair where among the experiments Smith and Weston have taken a demon piece from Pandora's hair and grafted it onto a rabbit. Of course, just as they're elaborating on how wrong, everything goes wrong, and the entire school goes insane, launching into a boss battle against said demon rabbit which in defeat explodes, mutating the principal and grafting experiments onto various sections of the school.

Cutting through the cafeteria, things become more demonically-possessed as DJ progresses—hot dog machines begin launching wieners, the cash register goes

The DS gets its own DJ game, when pigs fly.

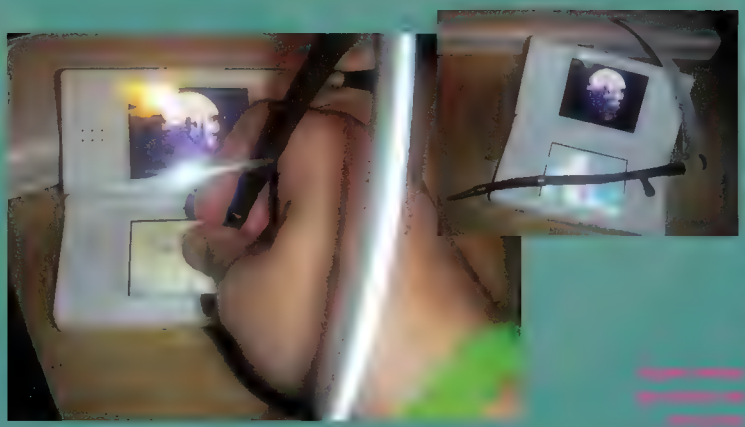


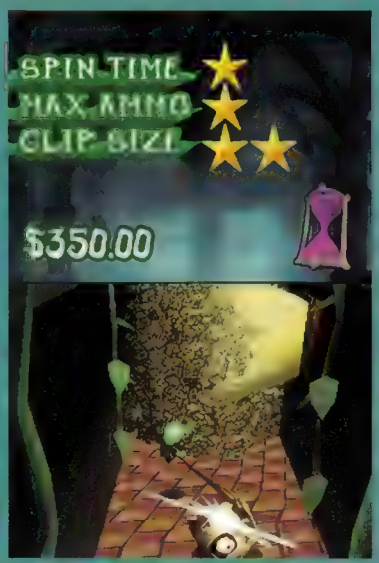
"Did I mention that [illegible] marking the second time she's [illegible] in the series..."

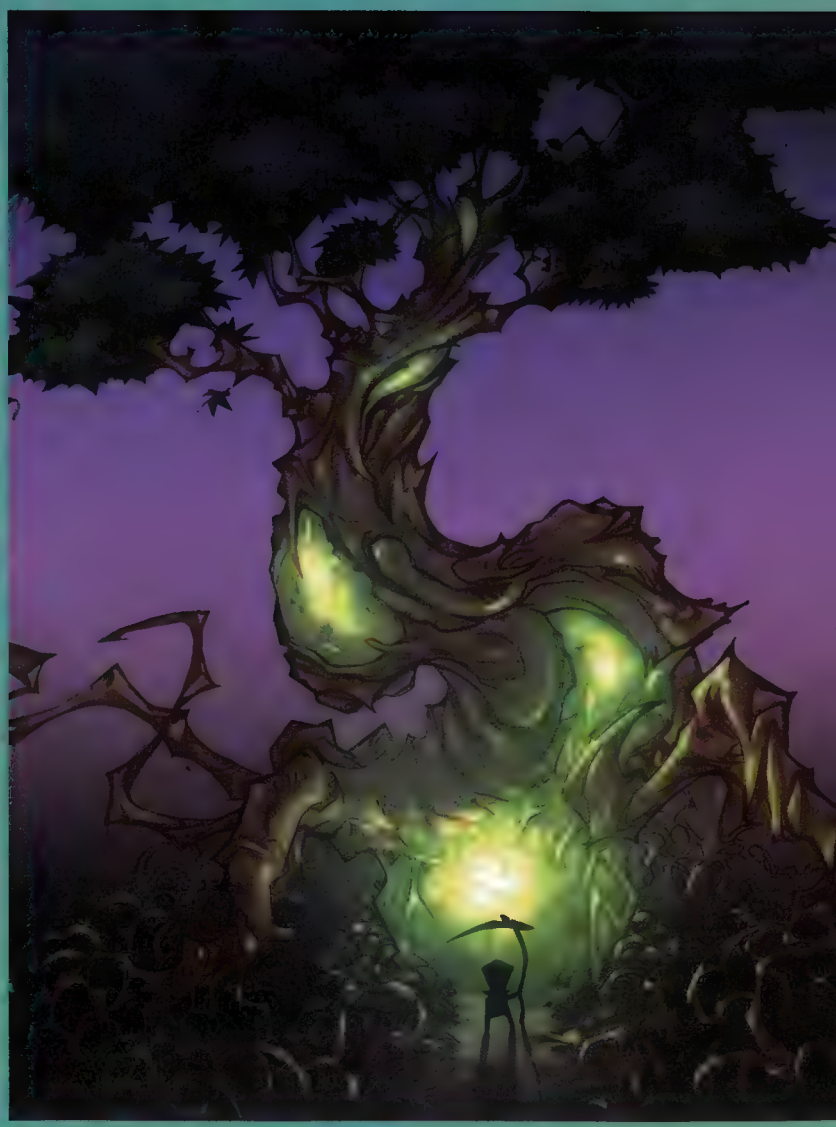


Scythe as a Stylus

Reaping the touch-screen souls of the dearly departed (available in a Death Junior action figure near you.)







"Buttons have no use in Science Fair of Doom...the combat is entirely stylus-driven..."

Guppy—who appears in mutated form in a throwback to Mike Tyson's Punch Out (only vs. a giant dead guppy), where you can actually egg DJ on when stunned by yelling into the DS. And Stigmartha—who's been mutated with a plant growth experiment 15-times DJ's height. Trapped at the top of the giant shrub and protected by a Venus fly trap, three platforms, obstructed by vines, block DJ's way. To get to each he has to defeat a certain amount of brawlers, throw a switch to let the sunlight in (killing the vines) and then talk to seedlings to grow as ramps. Some serious DS-style boss fighting awaits (Principal Joygrove and Mecha Pandora spring immediately to mind).

DJ's guns also come into play (the dual pistols slow enemies and the shotgun spins them) but for the most part the core game is about sixty-seventy percent melee to platforming, on top of the boss battles. And that's pretty much the long and short of the Science Fair of Doom thus far. Any questions? **play**

DS people

PSP people

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Sony
Developer	Sony Santa Monica	Available	Feb 2007

God of War 2

Revenge has just begun...

words **Brady Fiechter**

"Rest assured, it's freaking cool," exclaimed God of War 2 director Cory Barlog, responding to creative director David Jaffe's blithe attempt to shake out a few of the more nebulous details surrounding the team's sequel to last year's universally acclaimed God of War. For a game that's a year away, generalizations are all we've got to uncover the next chapter in Kratos' journey for bloody revenge. "We're going bigger on all aspects of the first game," said Barlog.

Bigger and badder begins with enemy encounters, which will involve familiar foes along with the expected new collection drawn from ancient Greek myths. In one confrontation with a giant Cyclops, our enraged hero uses his destructive blade like an ice-climbing pick, ramming it into the creature's belly and vaulting up to rip

"For a game that's a year away, generalizations are all we've got..."

Kratos' world has become even more daunting...

With god-like powers comes a new wardrobe.

out the giant eye for the kill. You get to keep your prize in inventory for later power-up use.

In the introduction for God of War 2, the early tone would lead you to believe Kratos's journey to the edge of the world will ride on a grittier, more terrifying undercurrent. Looking through examples like cinema, "second acts tend to be darker," observed Jaffe. It's often noted that the original game was inspired by the kind of high adventure you'd see in an Indiana Jones, but with this sequel, Jaffe's move away from director has passed the reigns to Barlog, who served as animation director on the original. It's promising to see more games today showcasing the unique sensibilities a director might bring to a project, as Jaffe pointed out.

The foundation obviously hasn't shifted too much, containing the same combo-heavy combat and heavy exploration that powered God of War. Puzzles offer intermittent thinking points, and often times getting from point A to B will require a lot of interaction with environmental objects. The emphasis is once again on propulsive cinematic presentation, as exhibited in the continuing mini-game battles and dynamic scene setups.

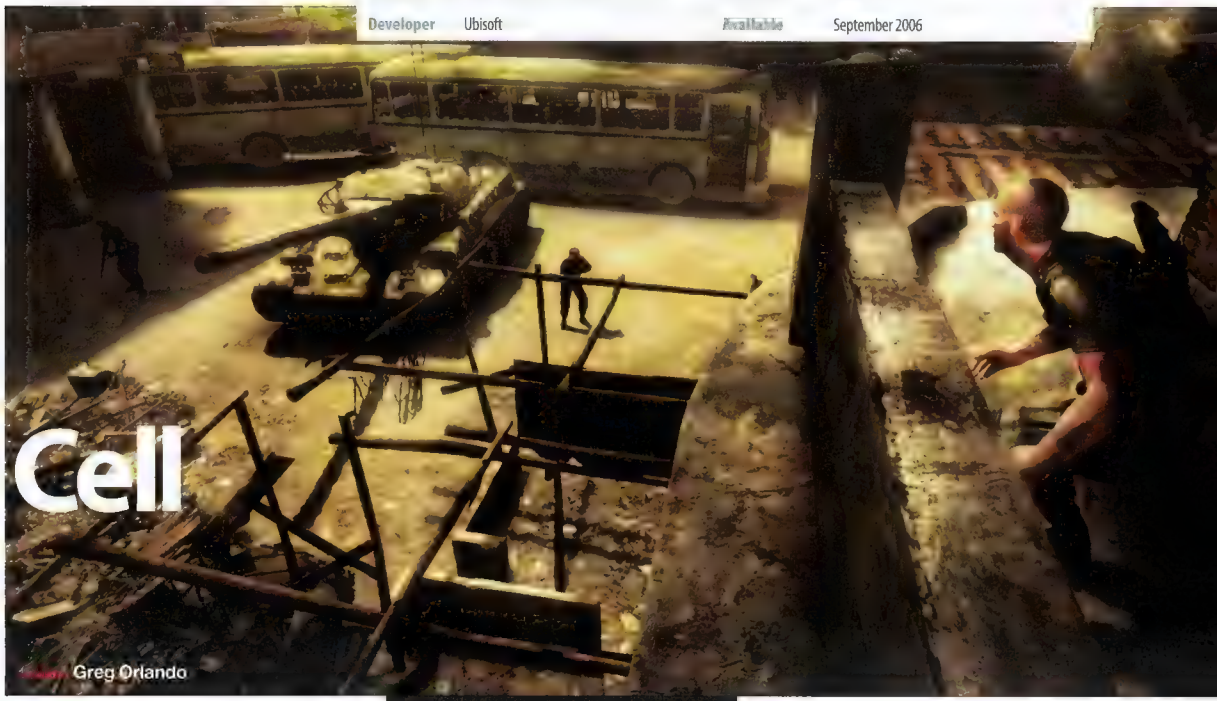
With Kratos' new god-like status comes a more functional character, who can now slide down quickly while climbing, grapple on hinge points with his blades of chaos, utilize a more robust magic system and even parry enemy attacks.

You've got a year to wait to see just how freaking cool it all comes out to be. **play**

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Double Agent

Hell out of a cell ...

System(s)	PC, Xbox 360, PS2, Xbox, GameCube	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft	Available	September 2006



Greg Orlando

The poor guy writhing in fear is, most likely, going to eat a bullet. He's chained to a wall with his hands behind his back and his mouth taped. Vegas odds say he's not likely singing "Ave Maria" as the gun is being pointed in his direction.

As grizzled secret agent Sam Fisher, the choice is yours: Does Mr. Flop Sweat taste lead? Your finger's on the trigger and the terrorists are waiting. And while the terrorists are many things—among them bloodthirsty, fanatical, and certainly willing to break a few eggs in the making of an omelet—they are decidedly lacking in patience.

"Every choice after this gets much, much harder to make," Julian Gerighty, co-producer of the Xbox 360 version of Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Double Agent, says. In Agent, the protagonist Fisher will find himself fresh from a New Orleans jail and deep inside a terrorist cell operating on American soil. It's his mission to infiltrate the group, gain its members' trust in order to discover, and ultimately thwart, its villainous plot.

The third-person Agent offers branching paths and multiple endings, and how could it not? At its heart, the game is about choice; Fisher must juggle two sets of objectives, each pulling him in a different direction, in order to complete his goal. Simply, this world won't save itself, and the terrorists certainly aren't going to blab their plans to someone who hasn't proven himself dedicated to the cause.

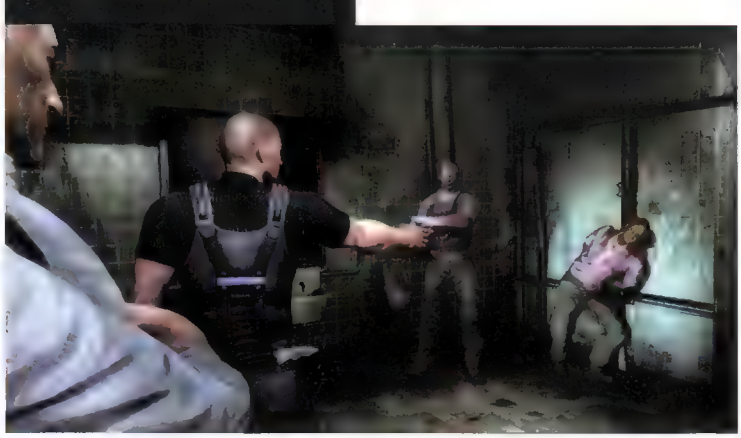
"Would you kill an innocent to save many?" Gerighty asks. Special "directed moments" put Fisher on the hot seat, asking him to make specific calls that will alter Agent's storyline. During these moments, you'll remain in control of Fisher's actions, and the game will push a cinematic feel, complete with close-ups on the faces of potential victims, a first-person view of a gun being aimed at a target, and heightened music to cement the urgency of the moment.

These moments are scattered amid a series of high-octane adventures, and just as Ubisoft has created a moral imperative for Fisher, it's also expanded upon the game's action sequences. In one arctic stage, the hero will need to plunge into frigid waters, maneuvering beneath an ice floe to assault a terrorist camp, possibly performing an underwater stealth kill in the process. Before assaulting the ice, it will be necessary to skydive to the objective during a pounding rainstorm, all the while battling an entangling parachute threatening to turn Fisher into the world's flattest secret agent.

Traditional Splinter Cell stealth elements have not been ignored with Agent. Gerighty says now it will be possible—although possibly foolhardy—to sneak underneath trucks to avoid detection. A nifty danger indicator on the back of Fisher's shoulder may simply be a wholly absurd video game construct, but it's also a great way to get rid of an annoying (and equally out-of-place) meter tracking the hero's current degree of concealment that appeared in previous Cell games. If nothing else, the addition of the danger meter shows Ubisoft, like its protagonist Fisher, is not above making the tough choices in order to get the job done. **play**

"...Fisher will find himself fresh from a New Orleans jail and deep inside a terrorist cell..."

Nothing says "talk to me" like a knife to the throat.



System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Capcom
Developer	Capcom	Available	June

DEAD RISING

The most fun you'll have in a mall all year

words Brady Fiechter

I'm normally the virtuous type in games, striving for sweet goodness in all my decisions. But when frantic Jeff begged for me to find his wife, I had to decline. At the time, it seemed only right to worry about my own life, and besides: I only had a hockey stick to fend off the impenetrable mass of zombies forcing me to take the long way back to the escalator. Sorry Jeff.

If you're decision is to be impetuous hero under any condition and give your fellow trapped mallgoers a helping hand, you'll be rewarded with prestige points for your successful efforts. These essentially amount to experience, boosting your strength and speed as you navigate the zombie battle zone. As a photographer out to bag the big story, snapping a few shots of the wonderful tragedy unfolding before you is another way to find reward. Occasionally, big scoops will come in over your cell phone—passing these up is much more difficult than disregarding a horrified husband.

"Dead Rising carries a humorous tone despite its rather graphic trimmings."

Dead Rising carries a humorous tone despite its rather graphic trimmings. If you want, you can play dress up, tossing on a snazzy suit and a pair of sunglasses—whatever you find lying around a store for the stealing—before heading out for the next wave of zombie killing. The selection of weapons is practically exhaustive; make sure to stop by the medieval store and pick up a nice battle-axe.

Whatever your instrument of offense, the damage is well portrayed, imparting an excellent visceral edge to the ubiquitous action. Rows of zombies snap back, explode, spin like a top, topple into one another. Avoidance is part of the fun too, as they lurch with an eerie quickness. The game's style isn't all dread and shadowy, leaving the impact up to the awesome numbers of zombies shambling around to get under your skin. It really is a bit disarming when you look out at the sea of evil stumbling around.

Missions in Dead Rising are timed, prompting you to grab as much information and save as many lives as you see fit before making your way to the news helicopter and escaping the mall. Theoretically you could blow through it, but what fun is that? Lots of fun options in this nifty spin on the zombie game. **play**

Never shop for pajamas during zombie season.

Mercenaries 2

World in Flames

It burns, burns, burns...

System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	LucasArts
Developer	Pandemic	Available	TBD

words **Greg Orlando**

The PlayStation 3 exclusive Mercenaries 2: World in Flames comes with the following pledge from Cameron Davis, Pandemic's director: "We will do a lot better this time."

Do not misconstrue. "I think [Mercenaries] was a genuinely fun game, and we're proud of that," Brown says. The third-person adventure, titled Mercenaries: Playground of Destruction, saw release in 2005 and was well-received, garnering an average score of 85 for its Xbox iteration and 86 for the PlayStation version from aggregate web site gamerankings.com. It was also intriguing enough to warrant a sequel, this time on the next generation of game consoles.

"Mercs always wanted to be a next-gen game," Brown says, "The PlayStation 2 and Xbox are great consoles, but there was so much more we wanted to do but just didn't have the power."

The PlayStation 3, Brown says, has the power to let Pandemic realize Mercenaries' potential and let them bring the game's fiery subtitle to life. "The concept of playing with fire is something that we've been talking about a lot. We think we've found a way to make fire really fun for the player, something that takes it beyond its usual role of cool graphical effect and into the realm of an interesting toy to get creative with. Until now, fire has been a very scary thing to work with in games, since it's such a fluid, organic substance. On the PlayStation 3, we have the processing power we need to model it."

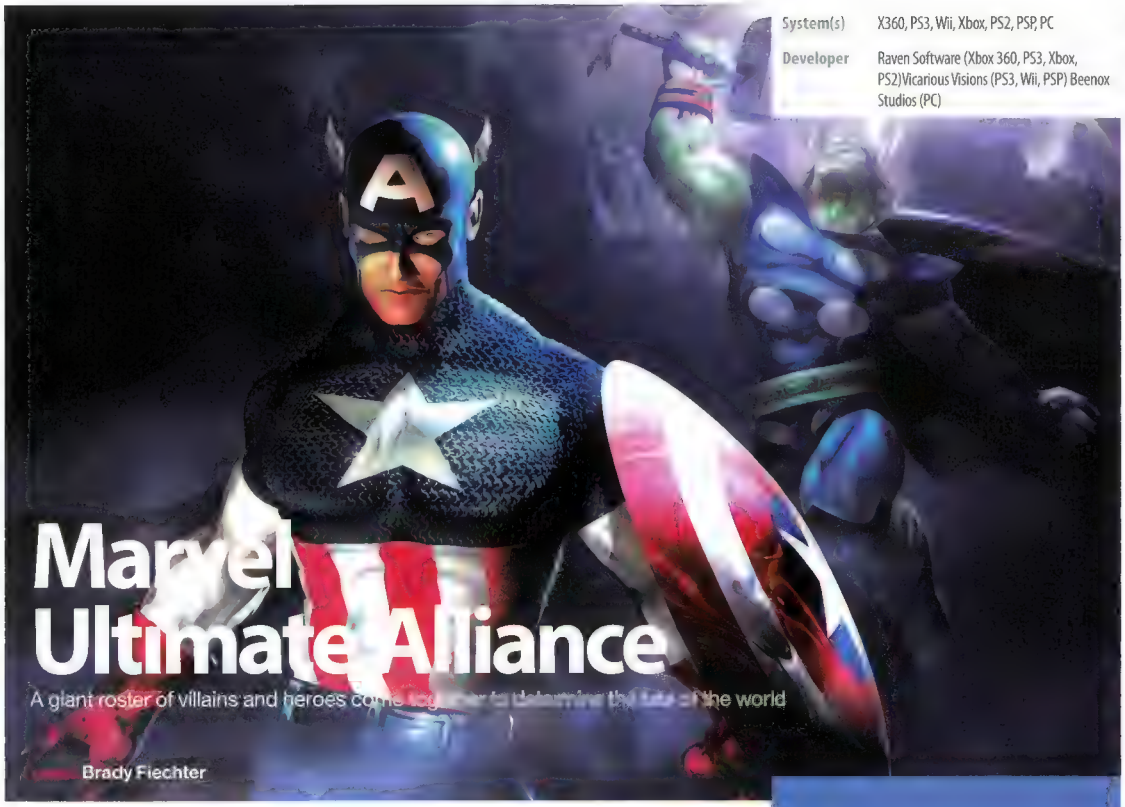
Flames takes place in Venezuela, amid the backdrop of an escalating conflict. Players can again take the role of the original game's three protagonists (American Chris Jacob, Brit Jennifer Mui, and the Swedish Matthias Nilsson) with a mysterious fourth mercenary to be announced at a later date. Pandemic promises extra customization items for all the game's warriors, with details on this particular aspect also forthcoming.

As with Playground of Destruction, the game will feature open-ended play and lots of destructible environments to wreck. Brown says, "Vehicles have landing gear, weak points, and panels that crumple and can fall off, and just a whole crapload of articulated parts. Buildings can be destroyed in an enormous variety of ways—we handle damage from collapsing an entire skyscraper, to knocking down half a house, to showing individual bullet holes." The level of detail is so high, the bullet holes appear to have depth, Brown says. "It looks like you can put your finger in them."

The original Mercenaries established a 52-card "deck," with each card representing an enemy to be captured or killed. For Flames, the jokers are thrown out of the deck, and then the deck tossed out the window. This time around, a new bounty system will be instituted with more than one faction paying out on an individual target. Players can now capture someone and shop him around to the different factions, as it were, to find who will pay the most.

New vehicles such as motorcycles and jet skis, plus improved artificial intelligence round out Flames' selling points. "One of the things we're really excited about is the concept of 'tactical personalities,'" Brown says. "Each group's soldiers can have very different behavior based on the personality and style of that group. For example, we want the guerillas to be very 'ambushy'— they'll lie in wait, really dig in behind cover, and make you work to drive them out into the open. Another group—I don't want to name names just yet—is much more reckless, and you'll find them out in the open, charging you and hoping to overwhelm you a lot more often." **play**

"This time around, a new bounty system will be instituted with more than one faction paying out on an individual target..."



Marvel Ultimate Alliance

A giant roster of villains and heroes come together to determine the fate of the world

Brady Fiechter

System(s)	X360, PS3, Wii, Xbox, PS2, PSP, PC	Publisher	Activision
Developer	Raven Software (Xbox 360, PS3, Xbox, PS2)Vicarious Visions (PS3, Wii, PSP) Beenox Studios (PC)	Available	Fall

Everyone adores a hero clad in tight clothing. In Marvel: Ultimate Alliance, no longer must you admire the job of world savior from a distance, as the identity of over 20 of the greatest super heroes becomes yours for the taking. Spider-Man, Wolverine, Captain America, Thor, The Thing, Elektra—nearly every good guy you can think of from the Marvel universe will be available to divert disasters, determine the fate of the Earth and even swim underwater in an effort to stop the next unstoppable criminal mind.

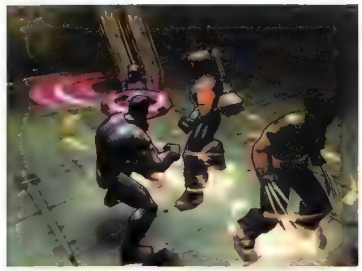
Normally, super heroes tend to work the local beat, but in Marvel: Ultimate Alliance, Dr. Doom has convinced every villain imaginable to join forces, which has of course given the world's stock of super heroes no choice but to counter this awful terror with their own massive group efforts. The result is a game with over 140 characters from the Marvel contingency wreaking havoc on one another in places like Atlantis and the Skrull central base.

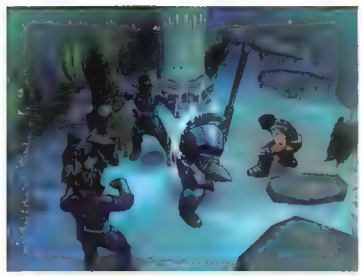
The heroes act in packs of four. You'll command a team leader, calling the shots as you build in growing combo attacks and long-range super-hero specials unique to the team. Stats, level-ups and other role-playing goodies come into play, and how you choose to allocate rewards for your efforts is your call. If you want nothing more than to be the dominant warrior of the bunch, be greedy and take it all for yourself; if balanced team effort makes more sense, distribute accordingly. When playing multiplayer—the entire single-player experience can be taken online—the most skilled hero of the group will be rewarded at the end of an area with special incentives.

Fans of the comics will be especially interested in the fact that C.B. Cebulski is on board to help write the narrative. The story arch can be altered depending on your decisions at certain plot points, where you'll decide on mission objectives and specific character interactions. As an action role-player, Marvel: Ultimate Alliance is going for customization and personal team growth to beef up the experience. If you're really competitive, paying close attention to the points system can reward you with big props online as you compare the progress of other players' team choices. **play**

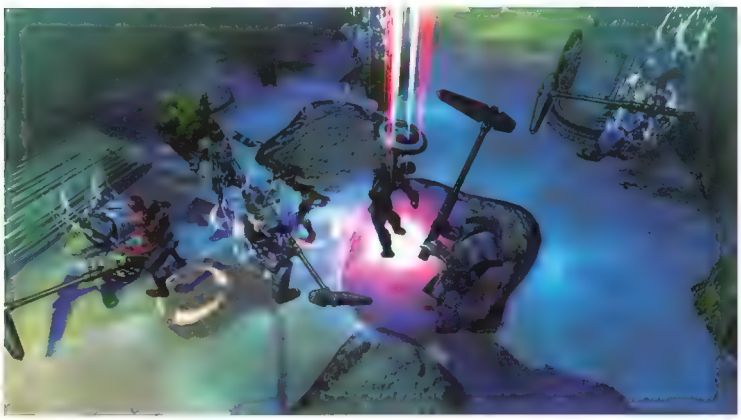
"...over 140 characters from the Marvel contingency wreaking havoc on one another..."

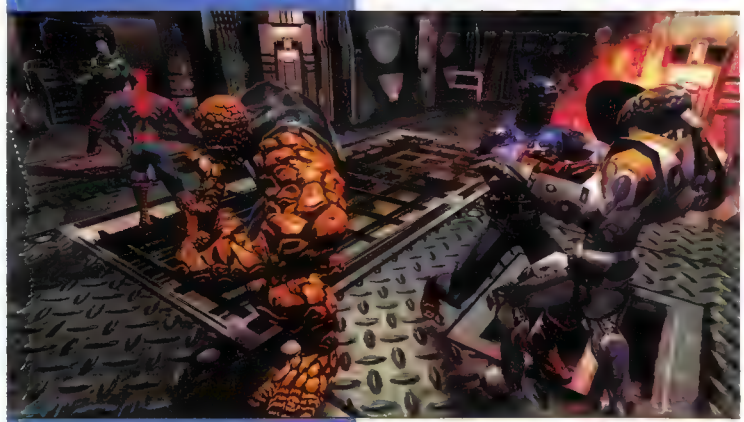
Current-gen screens...





The Thing is looking especially good on next-gen.





Red Steel

Men of Steel...

System(s)	Wii	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft	Available	Fall 2006

words **Greg Orlando**

People looked like idiots playing Red Steel. They'd gathered on a rather sunny weekday afternoon in San Francisco to see Ubisoft's offerings for the 2006 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) before the show itself, and there it was. Ubisoft had a one-level demo of the Wii game running on a GameCube debug unit with a prototype version of the Wii's lightgun/analog stick combination.

Idiots had fun, to be sure, even though the demonstration barely hinted at what Red Steel was all about. The game itself tells a tale of a Westerner caught up amid the violent world of the Yakuza, or Japanese Mafia. It features both swordplay and gunfighting, with the player attempting to rescue the protagonist's girlfriend. As for the demonstration, well, it was a shooting gallery complete with static and pop-up targets, nothing more and nothing less. In the game, the demonstration level will serve as a training exercise.

The lightgun aimed and shot; the analog stick controlled the character's movement. The Wii features a special tracking sensor to fit on a TV (either the top or bottom), and players had to stand a certain distance to play or else the game screen flashed with a warning in French. Move back, it said. No one looked cool pointing and swinging the lightgun, not even when it was twisted slightly so the player's gun was aligned to shoot in the fashionable gangster style (as in, horizontally). Everyone did look as though they didn't mind.

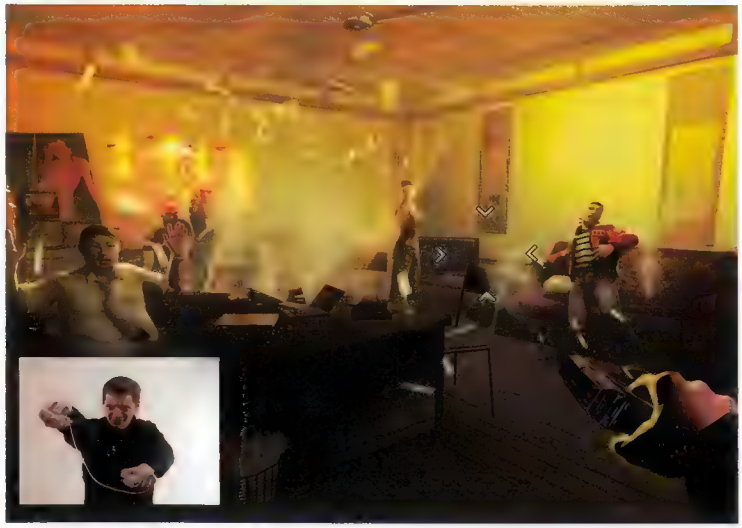
Only a gameplay video told Steel's true story. Using a series of predetermined motions, a player will wield a sword in combat against Japanese gangsters. The swordplay supplements the gunfighting, and both offer interesting twists. Combat need not be lethal; enemies can be disarmed and subdued. Put the sword to an enemy's throat and he'll drop to his knees, offer up his weapon, and take up the hero's cause. Allied Yakuza will aid the player in various ways, none of which has as yet been outlined.

Steel's title has yet to be finalized, and there are only hints as to what the game can do beyond its shooting gallery training scenario. Ubisoft has reported it will be possible to use the lightgun to hurl grenades by making a throwing motion (either over- or underhand), and that Steel may support four-player split screen play, running a traditional set of deathmatches and as-yet unrevealed other contests.

There wasn't much to Steel but the promise, and hint of Nintendo's Wii. Nonetheless, this one bears watching. **play**

"Using a series of predetermined motions, a player will wield a sword in combat against Japanese gangsters..."

Fire mace cannon!



Guns can be cocked to the side gangster-style.

Rayman

Rabid rabbits and fashion faux pas

System(s)	Wii	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft (Montpellier, France)	Available	Holiday 2006

words

Ancel
Creative director on Rayman

"It's a real pleasure for me to be back working on an all-new Rayman game. After wrapping the development of Peter Jackson's King Kong last year, the team here in Montpellier sat down to talk about having some fun with Rayman and his universe. We are running into a bit of a problem though because our game has been invaded by thousands of completely raving and vicious bunnies. Apparently they have been preparing this assault since the first Rayman game. They are everywhere, on our screens, in our studio, even on our t-shirts. We are now sending an SOS to all motivated gamers to help us get rid of them as fast as possible!"

Although far-removed from reality, King Kong was the closest to it Michel Ancel had ever come. Now that that silliness (met with rousing reviews and scores of accolades—mission accomplished) is out of the way, the maestro of the limbless creature that is Rayman is back to doing what he does best: making us stare in awe at the pure whimsy of the worlds and characters he creates. If gaming is indeed a ride, the talented Mr. Ancel is a Six Flags quadruple-loop suspension coaster. Truth be told, I'd rather he opted for a second stab at Tonic Trouble, but I'll take a super-funkified Rayman game headed for Revolution just the same.

Among the mayhem that will ensue later this year on multiple consoles (current-gen and Wii), new features include the ability to master and ride creatures such as sharks, eagles, rhinos, spiders, and angelfish as you battle hordes of evil rabbits. Yes—nasty, insane, completely out of control bunnies are out to take over the world. I knew it! Nothing that breeds that fast can be well-intentioned! Beyond the fact that Rayman raided Austin Powers's wardrobe for at least one scenario and needs to choose his friends more carefully, this communiqué from Montreal is the only other information we have to go on... **play**

The Wii lad's hair was straight when he picked up the controls.

*title in progress

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Sega
Developer	Sonic Team	Available	Fall 2006

Sonic the Hedgehog

Return of the blue blur

Greg Orlando

Say what you will about Sega's zippy, blue-hued mascot Sonic, but the hedgehog doesn't look a day over, say, 10. In reality, it's been 15 years since Sega birthed Sonic on the Sega Genesis and, with the advent of next-generation game consoles, the time is nothing but ripe for a redefinition of the character.

It might seem odd, given Sonic's history, to hear his handlers promise they're "bringing speed back to the forefront" for the character. It might also be strange to note Sonic's legs have been lengthened to give him a less cutesy appearance, or to discover his new 3D adventure, simply titled Sonic the Hedgehog, will drop him into a world largely populated by humans. It is, however, all according to plan.

"You really have to look at it from three different perspectives," producer Masahiro Kumono says through a translator. "When we say 'fresh start' we're looking at [Sonic's] expression and his attitude. Back in the day, you could show some, but not too much. So that's one of the things we really want to do—really express that you haven't seen the total Sonic."

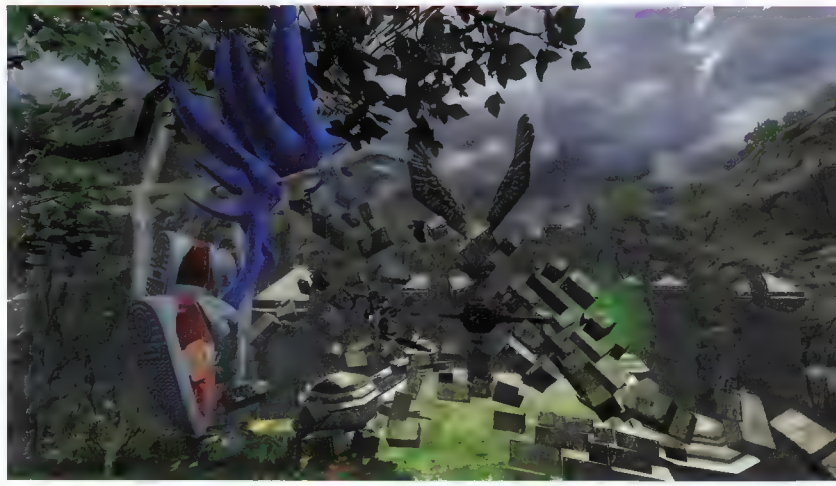
The Sonic Team is also attacking game environments as part of its three-pronged plan. "Shaders, motion blur, environmental effects, the physics engine—all these things really help to redefine the game world itself," Kumono says. "That's not something we've done in the past." The final element is, of course, gameplay that merges an expressive hero with a series of polished environments to give Sonic "fresh legs" as Kumono says.

"We want Sonic to make the same impact he did 15 years ago," he says.

It's too soon to tell whether this is hyperbole or the real deal, but the game does look very pretty in motion. Sonic was shown grinding on gently pulsing rails of light, smashing through stained glass windows, balancing on a rope across a huge chasm, smashing robots, and being carried off to new heights by a giant eagle. One particularly stunning scene showed Sonic across the side of a cliff from which water was pouring. Another, where Sonic was aligned in a more traditional alignment, highlighted the game's use of light and shadow as the hero sprinted through a city seemingly bathed in a blood-red tint.

As for surprises, Sonic will indeed have those. Sonic won't be the game's only playable character, for one thing. For another, there will be an online component for the title, although Sonic Team won't discuss that just yet. The biggest surprise of all, though, comes in the form of a mysterious white hedgehog. Call him Silver.

While being interviewed about Sonic, Kumono pulls out pictures of Silver from a book of rendered character and game shots. In one, the hedgehog's positioned in the foreground, with his right arm extended and palm facing outward. He looks almost translucent (the effect is called a glow-shader), and it's used to highlight the use of his supernatural powers: in the picture's foreground, a car has been lifted into the air. Another image shows the hedgehog in front of a series of iron bars that have been bent outward by some great force. At once, it's all made clear—Silver is telekinetic, able to stop bullets, manipulate the terrain in order to create shields to destroy projectiles, and lift and hurl heavy objects.

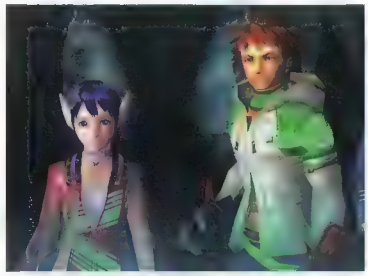


Long legs aren't just for super-models anymore.

Silver's exact role—and it seems obvious he's got some antagonistic relationship toward the dark hedgehog Shadow—is another of the game's mysteries. Expect the answers to come later in 2006, when the redefined Sonic starts his latest marathon trek. **play**

"The biggest surprise of all, though, comes in the form of a mysterious white hedgehog..."

System(s)	PC, PlayStation 2, Xbox 360	Publisher	Sega
Developer	Sonic Team Total Entertainment Software	Available	Fall 2006



Phantasy Star Universe

Universal Appeal ...

words **Greg Orlando**

The final frontier awaits, and it's filled with big, scary monsters. Luckily, the universe as done by Sega in the action-role-playing game Phantasy Star Universe is well adorned with plenty of guns, swords, and other weapons to kill said monsters, as well as bags to collect the loot monsters inexplicably cough up when they croak.

Universe expands on Sega's beloved Phantasy Star series with a brand-new single-player adventure. Sega representatives are pointing toward 35 hours or so of gameplay here, with players taking the role of young hero Ethan Waber as he attempts to investigate and, ultimately, banish the threat of the alien SEED. Here, Waber and three artificial intelligence-run allies pit their strength and skill against a series of increasingly bizarre monsters and boss enemies, including a gigantic, flying, game screen-choking, rock-hurling demon called Onmagoug.

For this year's model, Sega offers voice acting for all the game's characters and combat that's been augmented in some fairly notable ways. Heroes can now dual-wield weapons, allowing them to pack a gun for long-range attacks in one hand and a sword for more intimate encounters. A new "photon arts" series of add-ons can be attached to the game's weapons to increase both their damage and boost the number of string-hit combinations that can be performed. During gameplay, Ethan and his pals will also have access to various speeders and other vehicles to get them from place to place with greater speed.

"Universe expands on Sega's beloved Phantasy Star series with a brand-new single-player adventure..."

Universe also offers three planets for exploration, and a new playable race of beasts to join the already established humans, newmans, and robotic casts. Sega has not discussed the beasts' inclinations or special abilities yet, but it's a safe bet that they are at least remarkable in one aspect or another.

For the online mode, the game offers a wealth of customizable character features to create, perhaps, a ranger with a bit of a paunch or perhaps a pair of Spock-like ears pointing at 45-degree angles straight outward. Sega's expanded on the notion of an online lobby, too, giving players the chance to interact and shop in what appears to be a fully fleshed out city. Each player in Universe will be given his own room to store stuff and decorate as he so chooses; inside the room, there will also be a special mag-crafting machine/feature. Feeding items to this machine will enable the creation of special weapons, armors, and even humanoid forms—but the trick will be to find the right recipe of stuff to birth a usable item. **play**

System(s)	PlayStation 2, GameCube	Publisher	THQ
Developer	A2M	Available	July

Monster House

Survival-horror in the house

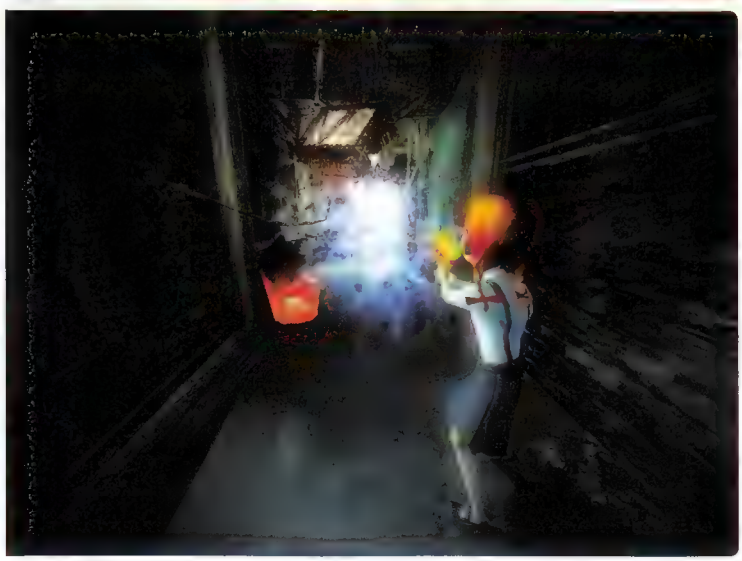
words Dave Halverson

Imagine, if you will, Resident Evil with super-squirters and slingshots, where instead of fighting zombies, you do battle with a living house (a very cranky living house). Survival-horror is about to get wonderfully bizarre and, depending on your outlook, perhaps a lot more fun. Based on the Steven Spielberg-Robert Zemeckis executive-produced film, which utilizes the next level of Sony Imageworks Performance Capture Animation (as seen in Polar Express only sans the dead-eye—these characters are exaggerated), Monster House also takes current-gen console graphics to new heights through visuals so striking that the game's art director has been nominated for an AIAS Award from the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences (AIAS).

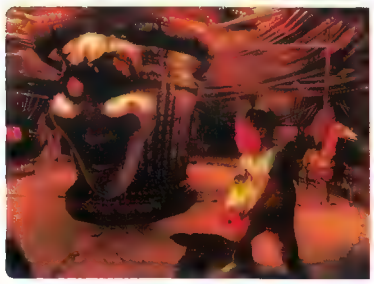
A rarity for a movie game, the Monster House game is as multi-faceted as the movie: Not only do all three stars serve as playable characters (the Harry, Hermione and Ron of ghost-busting, if you will), but the supporting actors also tip the scales, including Bones, the babysitter's boyfriend and resident head-banger, and Skull (played by Napoleon Dynamite's Jon Heder in the film) who works at the local pizzeria. Not only does Skull narrate the game (trademark drawl in full effect) and provide helpful advice, but he's also the reigning champion of Thou Art Dead, a throwback Ghosts 'n' Goblins-meets-Castlevania side-scroller that appears in the film and is fully playable in the game. Accessible through the main menu, this is more than a mini-game (much more) especially if you fancy a spell of classic 2D coin-op action. Thou Art Dead is a full-blown arcade game that's almost as impossible to put down as the core game, were it not for the rich visuals and the nature of the possessed furnishings that spring to life, only to regenerate after being suitably beaten. The game has an uncanny air about it, as you work to stay in the shadows and never know what the house has in store. It's bright, but in a twisted fairy-tale way, and what appears to be a normal two-story dwelling on the outside is actually a massive twisting sprawl within. A2M have struck a unique balance between fun and freaky. At one point I witnessed a hat rack spring to demonic life and assail the ceiling to attack from above—you don't see that everyday.

This generation's Goonies is finally at hand, opening in 100 plus theaters in REAL D's digital 3D format (simultaneously with the nationwide rollout) complete with its very own movie game incorporated into the actual video game. Now that's progress. **play**

"...Visuals so striking that the game's art director has been nominated for an AIAS Award..."



That'll teach you to use Robert Zemeckis as your interior decorator.



Rogue Galaxy

The power of 5

words Casey Loe

System	PlayStation 2	Publisher	SCEA
Developer	Level-5	Available	October

Level-5 produces some of the best character models the PS2 has ever seen.

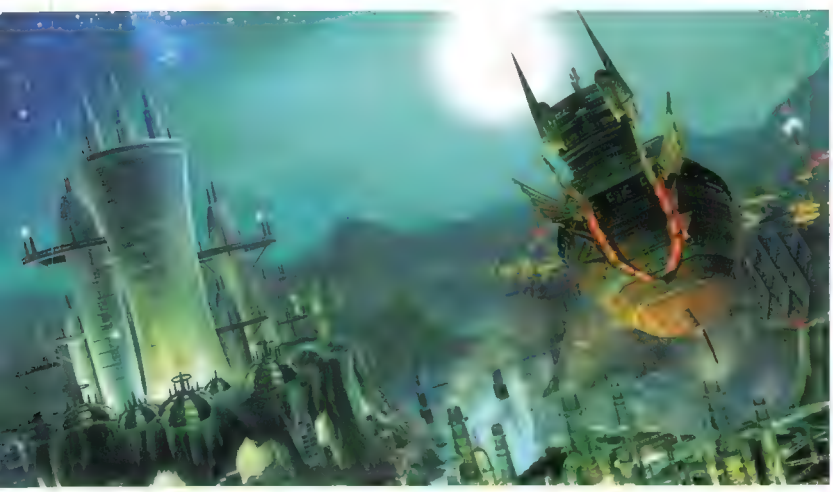
It's hard to imagine Sony commissioning an RPG as ambitious as Level 7's Rogue Galaxy without releasing it in the US, but rumors of a quick localization surfaced and sank earlier this year, and RPG fans began to worry. Fortunately, Sony has finally made their intentions clear—Rogue Galaxy is heading our way, but not without some major retuning first.

Sony is promising to release the US version with over 100 new weapons, new special attacks, and an entirely new planet to explore. They're also tweaking the battles a bit, starting with an overhaul of the chain combo system. In the Japanese version, a special combo sequence would sometimes begin when you struck an enemy, allowing you to do extra damage if you could time the hits correctly. In the US version, this opportunity will no longer come at random, and will now be a special move the player can initiate by using items found in combat.

When we reviewed the import version of Rogue Galaxy in our March issue, we praised its innovations but faulted the execution, which resulted in a game that was fun and fresh for a few hours but ultimately grew tedious. While we don't know if issues such as the overabundance of random encounters and repetitive dungeon design will be addressed, it seems that the developers are heading in that direction by adding some new elements to keep the battles interesting. With a whole new planet worth of content in the US version, hopefully the developers won't feel the need to pad the quest by triggering random battles every few steps in dungeon and town areas alike.

The newly revamped Rogue Galaxy won't be hitting US store until October—right around when Final Fantasy XII is expected to hit. Rogue Galaxy was the belle of the ball when it released in Japan last December, offering stunning visuals and some innovative attempts to at taking conventional RPG mechanics into real-time, but Final Fantasy XII has since blown it away on both counts. Will the new US additions help Rogue Galaxy distinguish itself? Can Sony get Rogue Galaxy onto store shelves before it's lost forever in Final Fantasy XII's shadow? Stay tuned for more details! **play**

"Sony is promising to release the US version with over 100 new weapons, new special attacks, and an entirely new planet to explore."



System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	BioWare	Release	November 2006

Mass Effect

Great "Mass" Effectations

words **Greg Orlando**

Once more with the star-trekking: BioWare is heading to outer space for its next action-themed RPG, and is planning to take on the Xbox 360 in a very big way. Mass Effect is the first game in a planned trilogy, a trilogy BioWare plans to release over the course of the 360's lifespan.

Effect is set in the distant future, with humans something of an enigma to a host of alien races. The protagonist is a member of SPECTRE, an organization dedicated to the preservation of the galaxy. Not coincidentally, he's also a human, the first to ever join SPECTRE. When the hunt for a rogue agent goes bad, the galaxy becomes enmeshed in the type of tsuris that will probably take three games (plus episodic content downloaded via Xbox Live) to unravel.

"Much of the inspiration for the style and spirit of the game comes from the classic science-fiction movies of the late '70s and early '80s—the era of films such as Alien, Blade Runner, and Star Trek II: the Wrath of Khan," Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk, joint CEOs for BioWare said in an e-mail interview. "Not only does this inspire the visual style and cinematic direction, but you'll also see it in other areas, such as the title sequence and even the musical score. It also incorporates the luminous, sleek design principles of some of the most prominent futurist artists and architects in the '80s—it's like a spectacular science-fiction painting brought to life."

Effect's fighting plays out in real-time, with three-man adventuring parties and squad-based commands. "Combat will be very tactical, as you can allow your squad to use their own A.I. or give detailed commands that allow your team to coordinate their actions on the battlefield," Muzyka and Zeschuk said.

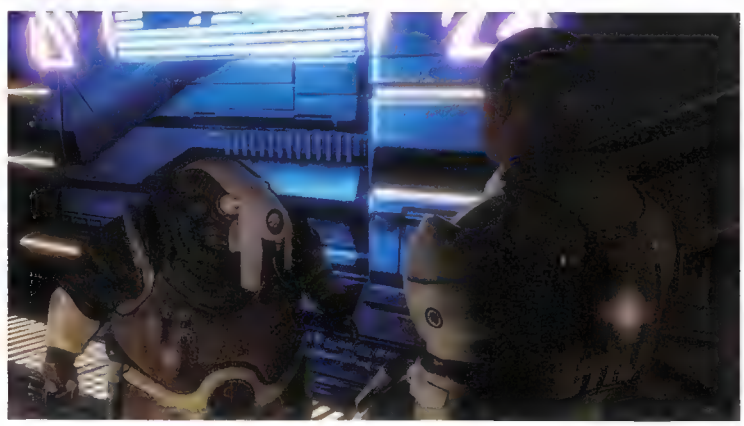
"Each character on the battlefield can bring a unique skill-set to the table and it will be up to the player to both cultivate those powers and also to think tactically to survive. You'll be able to draw from a wide range of aggressive combat feats, including both dangerous tech-based attacks and also powerful Biotic powers that manipulate mysterious physics forces to unleash tremendous energies on the enemy."

BioWare promises a wealth of alien races to interact with (and kill) during the course of Mass Effect. Here, the company has created what it calls "digital actors" with realistic body movements and facial expressions to augment the game's sense of reality. A morality system similar to those seen in BioWare's Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic and Jade Empire will track a player's in-game behavior, with the game's epic threat serving to heighten the impact of the player's choices.

"The fun (and quite innovative) approach we're taking is to use that incredibly important mission to empower the player to extreme levels. In other words, being 'evil' in Mass Effect doesn't just mean being a jerk to someone—it's about giving players really good reasons to do really harsh things—which have major impact on how the story unfolds. You can also take more of a classical hero approach, or one that's mainly self-serving, but they are all for the purpose of doing a mission so important that absolutely nothing will hold you back." **play**

BioWare's take on '70s and early '80s sci-fi. Beam me up SPECTRE.

"A morality system similar to those seen in Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic...will track a player's in-game behavior..."



Xbox 360, PC

Saber Interactive

Vivendi Universal

Fall 2006

TimeShift

Time has come today...

There's something inherently neat about tinkering with time. In Vivendi's first-person shooter TimeShift, players can stop, slow, and reverse time in small increments. Guns can be ripped from enemy hands. Rockets can be dodged. Giant pressers designed to crush metal on an assembly line can be deftly navigated. Wind from huge fans can be reversed so that what blows now sucks. Elevators can be recalled. Guards befuddled. Mischief made.

Yes, the great gimmick in TimeShift is one big cheat mode. There's no denying it, and not even the developers would argue the point overmuch. Yet the game manages to deal with its shortcoming in fine fashion. Enemies are so pervasive and powerful the use of time controls becomes more of a necessity than anything else. Some of the game's androids the hero faces can even employ time powers themselves, and zip around in blue-gray blurs.

Online play features the rather novel use of chronogrenades possessing various effects. Anyone in their blast radius will be stricken for a short time, with the developers at Saber Interactive suggesting, say, that someone could be stuck inside a bubble of frozen time while an enemy circumnavigates the frozen time sphere shooting bullets that will unfreeze in good, good time. Delightful. Greg Orlando

There's no time like the present...to kill you!

PlayStation 3, PlayStation 2, PSP, Xbox 360

Yuke's

THQ

Fall 2006

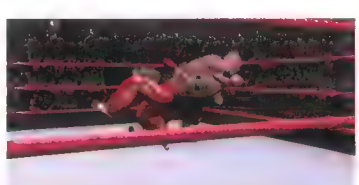
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007

Wrestlemania

John Cena has brought the smackdown. He's just whipped fellow wrestler Kurt Angle into what looks to be a giant speaker and the results, frankly, are electric. Angle twitches and jerks as electricity arcs over his body; clearly, this man is in pain.

World Wrestling Entertainment meets the next generation with WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007. With new technology comes small innovations in terms of how the wrestling is portrayed. Grapplers sweat with exertion, and are be imbued with detailed facial expressions to better tell a story. They grimace in pain, snarl in anger, purse their lips in surprise. The crowds appear in three dimensions, and the gameplay runs smoothly at 60 frames per second.

Analog stick control for grappling may well be 2007's great hook. With it, players can select strong and weak grabs just by tilting a controller's analog stick and are given the freedom to repeat moves (as in slamming a foe's head against the turnbuckle) or delay them for dramatic effect as necessary. Combined with a new system for climbing and piling objects for leaping attacks, the analog controls seem potent indeed—and THQ's promise of online play as well as an upgraded season mode only serves to make the brutality ever more appealing. Greg Orlando



System(s)	GameCube, PS2, Xbox, Wii	Publisher	THQ
Developer	Rainbow Studios	Available	Current-Gen Console June 6, Wii TBA

Cars

The stars are the Cars

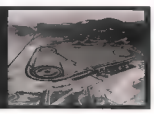
words **Dave Halverson**

There are two distinct levels of Pixar/DreamWorks/Disney-style computer animation: The Nemo, Chicken Little, Madagascar variety (more for kids) and the Robots, Shrek, Incredibles variety that has grown men pushing soccer moms out of the way to grab the toys. Cars will be joining the latter. NASCAR, Podunk Americana, and talking cars are just too intoxicating an elixir for any male of the species to pass up. Not so long ago, the games attached to these sterling properties were little more than afterthoughts meant to entertain Junior while he came down from his movie-candy high, but of late, Luxoflux's Shrek 2, Heavy Iron's The Incredibles, and Avalanche's Chicken Little have sought to raise the bar. Rainbow Studios intend on ratcheting it up a few more notches. You might expect your garden variety kart racer out of the Cars movie game, but instead what you'll find is an open-world, story-driven racing adventure rife with challenges, pristine racing action and some of the best mini-games ever devised… and this from yours truly: the carper of all mini-games.

Cars is also being readied for the Nintendo Wii launch, however, Jordan couldn't comment on the particulars regarding the Wii version as of press time, so we'll bring you the scoop as soon as it's available.

Interview

Jordan Itkowitz Lead Designer on Cars



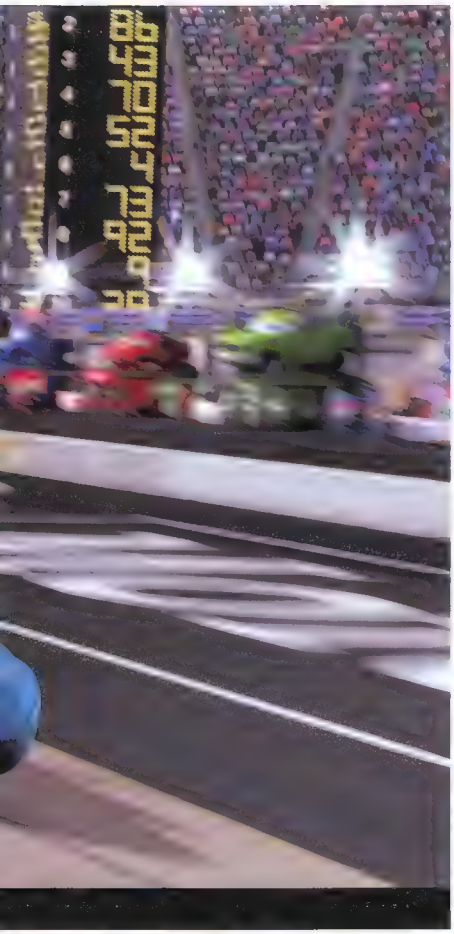
As the reigning kings of off-road racing, it must have been great to translate all of that know-how into a game where the vehicles are also living characters in a thriving universe. Playing the game, it seems like the team really rallied around the opportunity. Was this a particularly exciting endeavor for Rainbow?

Jordan: Absolutely. Rainbow's done ATVs, MX bikes, Sea-Doos, BMX bikes - even Pod Racers (*Star Wars*). Believe it or not, though, we'd never done cars, much less *Cars*, which gave us the privilege to work with Disney and Pixar – it was incredibly exciting, and as you might guess, a lot of fun as well.

More so than Nemo (more along the lines of The Incredibles) Cars seems like a property that will cover a very wide spectrum from kids to adults, especially given its NASCAR roots. Did you take that into consideration designing the game?

Yeah – there was no need to "kiddie" it down, aside from a gentler default difficulty setting. Our main goal was to present an experience that was as close to the movie as we could get it, while still delivering the fun pick-up-and-play racing experience that Rainbow fans have come to expect.

We also tried to cover a wide range of play styles in the game – it's not just road races. There are mini-games, exploration



"Our main goal was to present an experience that was as close to the movie as we could get it..."

Jordan Itkowitz Lead Designer on Cars

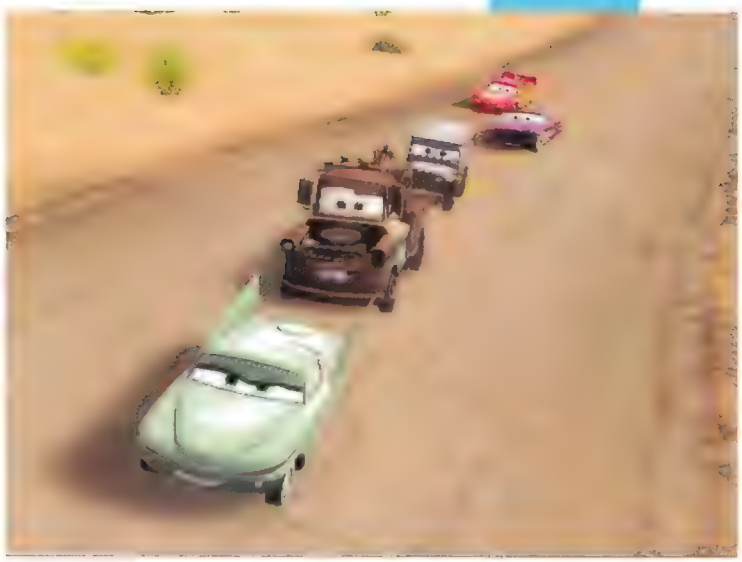
in an enormous, open, go-anywhere world, and of course the huge Piston Cup speedway races.

This also marks the first time you've worked with actors and developed a story. What was the experience like? Did you work closely with Pixar honing the game's story mode and script?
This was one of the most satisfying parts of the entire development process. Early on, after we pitched the basic storyline, I "auditioned" for the writing job on the project by sending Pixar's story team a few sample scripts for the planned cut-scenes. They were very happy with the work, and so I was able to write much of the game's script, with some guidance from the Pixar guys. There are over 60 cut-scenes in the game, with over 50 speaking roles – our animators had a field day with all of the performances and the scenes, as you can imagine. We all worked very closely with Pixar's animators to ensure that our scenes were staged, shot and acted like what you'll see in the film. It was like getting a master class in layout, animation and direction from Pixar. As for myself, I was able to sit in on all of the recording sessions with the talent. Joe Ranft was the co-director and Head of Story on the team and took a huge interest in the game directing all of the voice sessions. All the major actors from the movie reprised their roles in the game: Owen Wilson, Paul Newman (actually, John Lasseter directed that session himself), Bonnie Hunt, Larry the Cable Guy, and many more. Watching these actors do their thing - and watching Joe direct them – was not only immensely entertaining, but educational as well. Nobody puts a cast together like Disney and Pixar, and *Cars* is no exception.

I love that you've plugged in drifting and other trademark Rainbow features such as pre-loading, and I have to say, your mini-games are among the best I've ever played. What other types of control nuances can we look forward to?
Wow, thanks! Given that these aren't just cars, they're also characters, we looked for ways to add extra abilities that you don't normally see in racing games. So you can jump, tilt up on two wheels, and flip around 180 and drive backwards (with inverted L-R controls). There are even some fun little tricks you can do outside the racing action, like donuts and quick 180 hockey-stops.

How would you categorize Cars?
We have an expansive, branching game structure, an explorable open-world full of race courses, secret paths and hidden areas, and more than 30-minutes' worth of original story via our cut-scenes, so I'd just call the game a "racing adventure."

Did you pull music from the film or create an original score for the game?
We were very lucky to work with Bruno Coon, the co-composer on the film (alongside Randy Newman), and he composed about 45 minutes of original score for the game (recorded with a 50-piece orchestra). I love the movie score – it's my favorite Newman score since *The Natural* - it's incredibly warm and emotional, with a blend of Americana, rock, country and bluegrass, and we've



got the same sound in the game. Thanks, Bruno!

In addition to the score, the game includes a bunch of licensed tracks: Stray Cats, Lynyrd Skynyrd, The Explosion, The Edgar Winter Group and more – great driving songs that really fit the *Cars* videogame world.

Besides working with cars and elements that didn't make the film, were there any criteria for the game design going in?
Immediately after we saw the first rough cut of the film (little more than storyboards and a scratch track), we knew right away that this shouldn't just be a linear succession of races. We wanted players to be able to explore the world of Radiator Springs, and so we quickly settled on the open-world format. That decision set us off on a very different (and at times, very challenging) development process, but we achieved our goal.

The open-world format linked to mini-games and various competitions is exactly what I was hoping for over another token "kart" type racer. So you ruled that out immediately...
There's just so much you can do with this property that going the easy route would have done it a disservice. You only get two hours in the theater with the film (a two hours that you will want to repeat as soon as it's over, trust me), but with the game, now you get a terrific opportunity to immerse yourself in *Cars*, relive your favorite moments, and experience new ones as well. The open-world format was absolutely the best way to achieve this.

I know the characters have dialogue within the cut-scenes but will there be any trash talking during a race when they're trading paint?
Of course. We have hundreds and hundreds of very funny lines you'll hear as you're playing through the races and events. You can also interact with the *Cars* characters when exploring the world – they'll call you over to where they're parked, say hello on the road, yell at you if you speed by and scare them, and of course, get upset if you crash into them (which is often quite amusing). But don't worry, no one gets hurt.

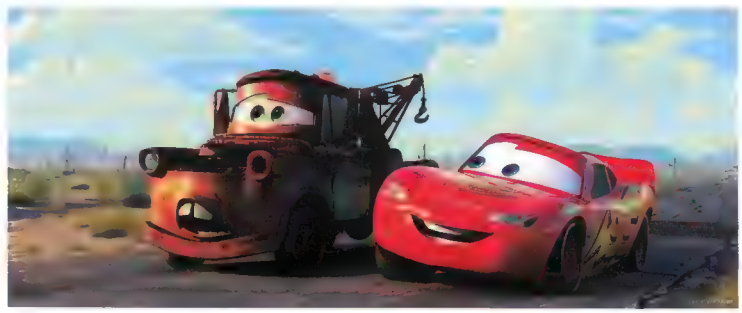
How does the game differ from platform to platform? Will we find the usual refinements for GameCube and Xbox over PS2?
Same game for the three main console SKUs (and the PC and Mac as well). And don't forget, there are additional games on the DS, PSP and Game Boy Advance, plus a kids' activity game on the PC and Mac.

"...we knew right away that this shouldn't just be a linear succession of races..."

Jordan Maxwell Lead Designer on Cars

Other than Lightning McQueen, who is your favorite Car?
It's pretty safe to say that everyone is going to fall in love with Mater after seeing the movie, and he is just as hilarious and endearing in the game as well. Even though we'd heard his lines dozens of times throughout development, we still laughed every time they played. Mater's got three mini-games all to himself, so you'll get plenty of time with him in *Cars*. Enjoy the ride! **play**

You should tow for NASCAR... They have dental.



Destroy All Humans 2

System(s)	Xbox, PS2	**Publisher**	THQ
Developer	Pandemic	**Available**	Fall

Humans are once again the hunted in Destroy All Humans 2, and returning for the hunt is Crypto 137, a heavily-armed alien who seems to have a particular disdain for everything '60s. It's the Cold War—Soviets and ninjas and government agents are yours for the incinerating. *Brady Fiechter*

ATV Offroad Fury 4

System(s)	PlayStation 2	**Publisher**	SCEA
Developer	Climax	**Available**	September

This year, ATV fans get a change of pace with a choice of buggies, trucks and MX bikes thrown into the mix. A new story mode starts you out as a rookie, prompting you through various stages and challenges through 72 tracks across 6 continents. *Brady Fiechter*

Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC	**Publisher**	Ubisoft
Developer	Gearbox	**Available**	Fall 2006

Hell's Highway will be paved with many a dead German, as Gearbox and Ubisoft team up for the third Brothers in Arms game. Players can command multiple squads including machine gun- and bazooka teams in the quest to punch a hole through to Berlin. The game is more action-heavy than its predecessors, but still puts a lot of emphasis on tactical play. *GO*

SpongeBob Squarepants: Creature from the Krusty Krab

System(s)	PS2, GameCube, Wii	**Publisher**	THQ
Developer	Blitz (console)	**Available**	Fall 2006

Get ready for 9 unique "fantastic tales" with everyone's favorite porous dishwashing apparatus Spongebob, including all new gameplay mechanics (tailor made for Wii) like flying, sky-diving, and hot-rod racing, along with an all-new edgier art style. *Dave Halverson*

LOTR: The Battle For Middle Earth II

System(s)	Xbox, Xbox 360	**Publisher**	Electronic Arts
Developer	EA LA	**Available**	Summer 2006

One ring will thrill them all. With Electronic Arts' The Lord of the Rings: Battle for Middle Earth II, it's possible to command huge armies with an Xbox 360 controller and take part in epic battles online.

A real-time strategy, Earth II has been ported over from PCs, but tuned to run on Xbox 360. A new control scheme allows armies to be selected merely by hovering a cursor over them and pressing the 360 controller's A button. The 360's trigger buttons further refine control, allowing for quick jumps around the map to see potential trouble spots, the creation of new soldiers, and selection of specific troop/race types. The 360 controller might not ever approach the elegance of a mouse, but EA's configuration works well nonetheless.

Six playable factions are included in the game, from elves to the Uruk forces of Isengard. Collect the ring, and it will be possible to summon either Galadriel from the elves or Sauron, and each will be able to devastate the opposition. Other unlockable heroes can be enlisted after meeting some of the game's goals, and EA has created four multiplayer modes specifically for the Xbox 360 Live portion of Earth II. *Greg Orlando*

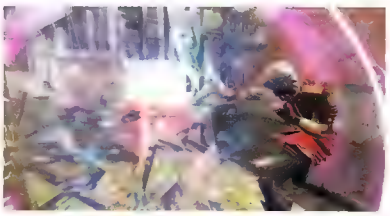
Arthur and the Minimoys

System(s)	PlayStation 2, PC, PSP, GBA, DS, Xbox 360	**Publisher**	Atari
Developer	Etranges Libellules	**Available**	Summer

It may be a children's game, but Arthur and the Minimoys neither condescends to its audience nor has an appeal limited to those under 12. It's a bright and brilliant translation of the upcoming Luc Besson animated film and stars three tiny heroes working in conjunction with one another to solve puzzles and save the day. *Greg Orlando*

Enchanted Arms

System(s)	Xbox 360	**Publisher**	Ubisoft
Developer	From Software	**Available**	TBA

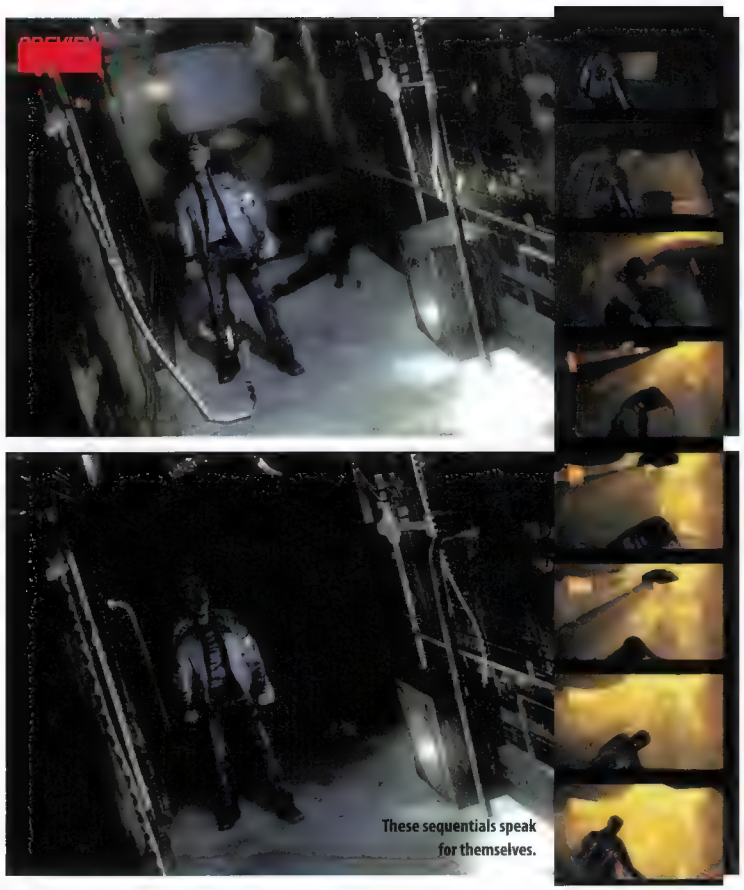


A gorgeous RPG, Enchanted Arms features grid-based combat and approximately 75 different playable characters to discover and take into battle. Ubisoft promises pizza men and mermaids who take to the field of battle inside clams. And, if the battles ever become tedious, Arms has a fast-forward feature. *Greg Orlando*

Flatout 2

System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC	**Publisher**	Vivendi Universal
Developer	Bugbear Entertainment	**Available**	Summer 2006

Any game featuring minigames where the goal is to hurl the driver of a car through a windshield and into/around/over/through something is pretty much video gold. Sure, FlatOut 2 has a variety of race modes, but you might be, ahem, otherwise occupied as to miss them all. *Greg Orlando*



Alone in the Dark

System(s)	Xbox 360, PC	**Publisher**	Eden Games
Developer	Atari	**Available**	Fall

Alone in the Dark is reaching to break away from less of a scripted, static presentation and into more open-ended territory with its mood-driven horror. With an emphasis on realistic physics and extensive environmental interaction, the idea is to offer more than a straight demon-killing simulator. *Brady Fiechter*

Mobile Ops: The One Year War

System(s)	Xbox360	**Publisher**	Namco Bandai Games America Inc.
Developer	Dimps/Dream Execution	**Available**	Holiday 2006

Gundam fans rejoice. Your Mobile Suit awaits! Arm yourself with beam sabers, heat hawks and all new melee weapons as you get a first-hand feel of what combat in the universal century really feels like. Fight inside your MS and out in light infantry, on foot or in vehicles. The ultimate Gundam experience seems to be at hand. *Dave Halverson*

Test Drive Unlimited

System(s)	Xbox 360, PC	**Publisher**	Atari
Developer	Eden Games	**Available**	Fall

You're staring at the game that Atari hopes will change the face of racing; an M.O.O.R. (Massively Open Online Racer) with the ability for thousands of gamers to play simultaneously. It certainly looks the part and the choice of bikes and cars, along with a list of features you wouldn't believe has our motors revving. *Dave Halverson*

Snoopy vs. the Red Baron

System(s)	PS2, PSP, PC, XBOX	**Publisher**	Namco Bandai Games America Inc.
Developer	SmartBomb Int.	**Available**	Fall

There are obvious saleable ploys to siphon the money from our pockets and then there are games like Snoopy vs. the Red Baron, that no red-blooded, doggy-loving American could possibly pass up. Cameos, multiple planes, 50-plus single and co-op missions…it's all here. *Dave Halverson*

System(s)	PS2, XB, XB360	Publisher	Eidos	Available	Now
Developer	Crystal Dynamics	Online/Multi	N/A	ESRB Rating	T

Tomb Raider Legend

Tales of a job well done

words **Dave Halverson**

The Tomb Raider collective finally exhaled on April [illegible] lives anew, beautifully remodeled and ready for action. Crystal Dynamics picked up the red-hot gauntlet and successfully remade one of gaming's most legendary franchises, retooling everything from the control to the play mechanics to the size of her not-so-humble breasts. Not that there was anything wrong with the old Lara but the new face of Tomb Raider certainly points to another era of epic adventures. We caught up with a few members of the TRL team post letting their new heroine out of the bag…

Interview

Crystal Dynamics

Matthew Guzenda (Senior Producer)
Riley Cooper (Lead Designer)
Gary Snethen (Senior Producer)

Great games are defined by great art and seldom if ever have I seen such attention to detail or felt so connected to an onscreen counterpart. The subtle effects when Lara's grip on a ledge forms pads of dust; the way she hangs perilously for a moment when she barely clears a chasm, or how she grasps objects such as ropes…this is the stuff classics are made of. How complex a job is it connecting character to environ to this degree?

Gary: It was a challenge. We put a great deal of effort into connecting Lara with her world. For example, when Lara jumps over a chasm, she sees the ledge on the far side. If she comes in high, she'll raise one leg and connect with her foot. If she comes in low, she'll stretch her arm and reach out with her fingers to make up that extra little bit of distance. To give Lara this sense of awareness, we created

several new systems that don't exist in any other game.

There's even an effect when Lara passes through waterfalls.
Gary: We added many such subtle touches throughout the game to further reinforce Lara's connection with the world.

Above all, what I've always loved most about Tomb Raider is the massive play pens/gear works that fill each massive room: That feeling once you enter of *wow, I don't know how I'm going to get over there but I can't wait to find out.* You've managed to incorporate the tried-and-true nature of the gameplay while devising among the best puzzle-action the series has seen. There are those that complain of pushing and pulling, but the physics involved now and the addition of the grapple hook I felt reinvigorated the play mechanics. The catapult/teeter totter for instance was a cool device. It must have been a daunting task upping the ante on the game that defined this type of gameplay.
Riley: We always wanted to try and recreate the best of the Tomb Raider experience. Among other things, that meant large explorable spaces and room-filling puzzles. Achieving this in a fashion compelling to modern audiences was definitely a challenge however, as that meant utilization of physics. There still aren't many games out there that have incorporated physics, particularly in a world as realistic as ours, as more than an effect of destruction. Half-Life 2 is closest, but the differences in what you can do with physics in a first- versus third-person game are great. Over time we began to see more and more possibilities for what we could do and would continually improve Legend with that increased knowledge. The teeter-platform you mention being one of the later additions.

"We always wanted to try and recreate the best of the Tomb Raider experience."

Riley Cooper Lead Designer

Having played the game on Xbox 360 I feel spoiled but at the same time can't help but wonder how different the geometry might be if you developed for 360 from the ground up. What would be the most notable difference if you had? The water on 360 is mind-boggling. Does it get any better than that?
Matthew: It's extremely hard to say for certain. I can't think of anything obvious in any one area that would clearly be different if we'd started on 360. Because of the PS2's streaming engine, we already had pretty complex geometry to work with so it wasn't really a handicap to work with those assets. We did replace a lot of objects that had low poly-counts, like the plants, and we also completely remodeled all the characters in the game. The main issue with working with our PS2 geometry was that it was modeled to be as efficient as possible on the PS2 but not necessarily as efficient on the 360 which made some areas on the 360 very tricky to get working.

How difficult a process was it normal-mapping the environments? Is it a simple process of working with what's already there, or do you have to create an entirely new surface?
Matthew: Completely changing the lighting model for the 360 version added a significant amount of work (it would have been much easier to just do a high-res version of the Xbox version). It's a pretty time-consuming process. The PS2/Xbox artists originally built all the textures at a higher resolution but because of the lighting model used on the 360 version we couldn't just use those textures in the game. All the detail that was added into the texture (like the shadows) had to be taken out. We then went back in and created the other layers necessary to work with the per-pixel lighting. That got us the base normal-mapped texture. After the new texture was in the game and the level was relit with the new lighting model, the artists went back in and tuned the texture, so that we could get the look we wanted. In a lot of cases they just built a completely new texture for the 360 version. It's not particularly hard, but it is time consuming to do the work and get the look you want.

How much time did you have to upgrade for the 360 version or was it planned from day one?
Matthew: It took a full year to get the 360 version done although the bulk of the work, which was the art conversion, was done over the last 6 months. The 360 version was always a planned version, although we did almost no work on it during the first year of Tomb Raider development. However during the early development phase of the project, we set up several of our new Tomb Raider tools to be ready for 360 production. This helped with production on the 360 version especially on the art side and allowed us to work almost in parallel with the PS2 team. This was crucial to allow us to get the 360 version out at the same time as the PS2/Xbox versions.

I'm not one to complain about game length, but Legend is on the short side by TR standards. I was hoping for 10-15 hours but it's a bit less. Is this a result of how much pre-production and ramping up you had to do to set this milestone? Might the next game be longer now that everything is in place?
Matthew: Because we hadn't done a Tomb Raider game before, a lot of the challenge was actually building the systems and getting the design right. Several areas in the game were reworked multiple times as things changed with Lara's control system. We also did a lot of focus testing both internally and externally to see what worked and what didn't which again caused additional rework. Because of the art and design rework we were limited in how much we could build given the time given to us. Now that we have the experience and know what works and what doesn't, it pretty safe to say given the same amount of time we could build a bigger game.

The motorcycle bits were a great unexpected surprise. Arcade fun is alive and well and living in Tomb Raider. Was there a lot of back and forth on the rooftop jump about whether to do the entire thing in a cut scene vs. letting players take control? I was pleasantly surprised that you left that to the player. Again, just a great sense of immersion all around.
Riley: One of our very early design

goals was to use cut-scenes sparingly and to not use them to have Lara do things that are cooler than what she can do in the rest of the game. Two of the ways we achieved our goal was by the inclusion of what we call Big Moments and Super-Actions. Big Moments are where we put Lara in a life or death situation that requires the player to respond quickly to get through. Super-actions, like the motorcycle rooftop jump, are classic playable cinematics a-la Dragon's Lair. These allow us to stylize the camera and Lara's actions more heavily, but without losing interactivity and staying within the bounds of what you believe Lara would be able to do. We also had a serious commitment to story however. We would use Lara's headset to develop character and plot where we could, but sometimes there's no better way to tell a story than via a cut-scene, so we have those too.

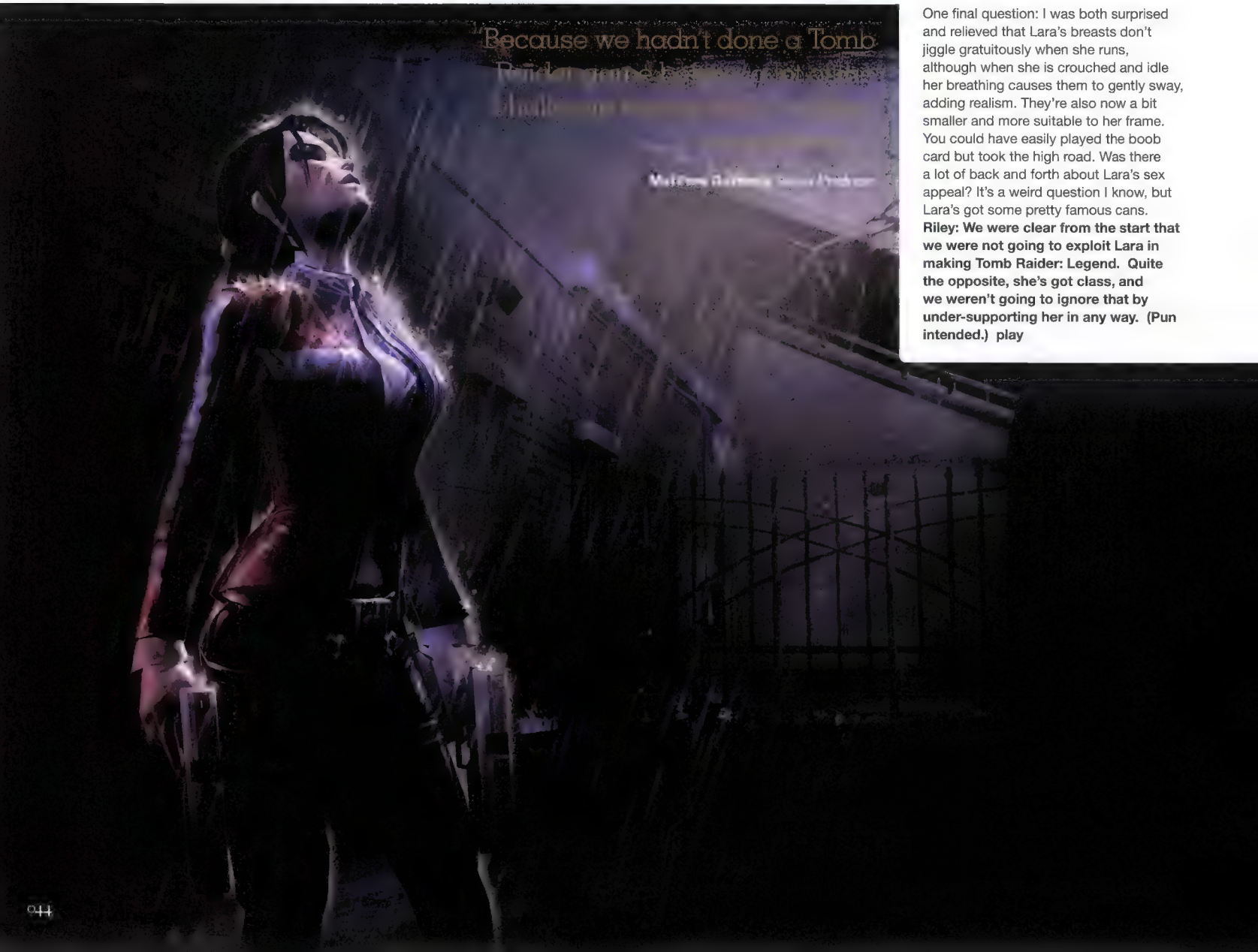
Okay so I didn't like everything…Zip and Alister for one. Did you ever consider an option to switch them off? I've always considered Lara a lone adventurer in the past and enjoy the feeling of solitude. I know it's the information age and all but they can get on one's nerves.
Riley: From where we sat there was about a 50/50 split on how present Zip and Alistair are throughout the game. Some people enjoyed the company and the extra info, character, and back-story they shared, others felt exactly as you did. Including an option here wasn't quite as easy as it might seem, but it is something we debated and will be looking into for Lara's next adventures. I'm glad to hear you enjoyed the rest of the game. Hearing from people who enjoyed Tomb Raider: Legend is what makes the challenge that is game development worth it.

So is this your James Bond or are you feeling separation anxiety from Kain and Raziel? Are you invested to the degree that you can't wait to start the next game in the series? It certainly feels that way when you're playing the game. I got the feeling that you made the best game you could make; that it's all onscreen.
Matthew: So we definitely didn't plan Legend as a one-off for us and we spent a lot of time building the foundation for continuing the series with the expectation that we would be working on future Tomb Raiders. However, in order for that to be a reality, the goal for Legend was always to make as good a game as possible and get the Tomb Raider series back to its roots. Hopefully we've achieved that and the studio can continue on future TR games. Kain and Raziel were put on hold so that we could focus on Tomb Raider but they're definitely not forgotten at the studio.

How many internal teams does CD have these days? Sharing assets would it be possible to develop 2-3 games within a 24-month time span? If so, what about a new Gex!?
Matthew: CD generally has enough staff to keep at least 2 full game teams running at any one time. With the extra resources needed to do next-gen titles I'm not sure that we'll get 2-3 games out over 2 years but we'll definitely be working on other titles besides Tomb Raider. I wouldn't say another GEX title is never going to happen, but I wouldn't hold your breath waiting for it either.

TRL is a fantastic game that has delivered Lara from her archaic controls to a new level of fluidity and grace. We're in your debt… One last question: Given the Revolution's unique controls, ease of development, and simpler technology, would a Revolution version be an exclusive game, rather than the obvious port we'll get between PC, PS3 and 360? Please say yes.
Matthew: Revolution is pretty different from the 360 and PS3 which is good and bad. It's good because it does encourage unique game versions but that also makes it a much bigger risk to develop for. We're definitely interested in the Revolution but I can't comment on any future CD plans for the platform.

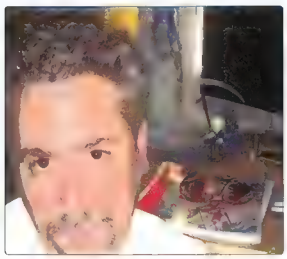
One final question: I was both surprised and relieved that Lara's breasts don't jiggle gratuitously when she runs, although when she is crouched and idle her breathing causes them to gently sway, adding realism. They're also now a bit smaller and more suitable to her frame. You could have easily played the boob card but took the high road. Was there a lot of back and forth about Lara's sex appeal? It's a weird question I know, but Lara's got some pretty famous cans.
Riley: We were clear from the start that we were not going to exploit Lara in making Tomb Raider: Legend. Quite the opposite, she's got class, and we weren't going to ignore that by under-supporting her in any way. (Pun intended.) play



Painkiller Hell Wars
Outrun 2006 Coast to Coast
Hitman
Dreamfall
New Super Mario Bros
Brain Age
Gradius Collection
Legend of Heroes 2
Tomb Raider Legend
From Russia With Love

Reviews

June 2006



Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...

Mike Griffin
PC Editor

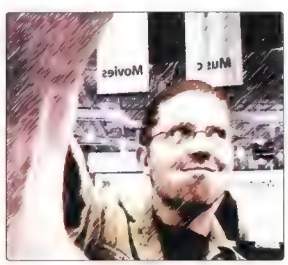
Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

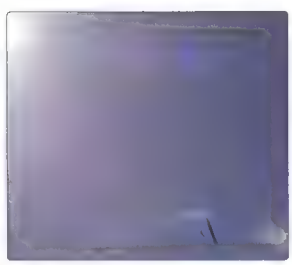
Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.



Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?



Mike Hobbs
Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure,
Now playing: New Super Mario Bros.
Thoughts on Wii: At first I thought it said Wii, and thought that was interesting. Then noticed it was Wii and feared people making fun of it. I like it. It looks cool as an image and is odd. Sony or Microsoft wouldn't dare.

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

The New Super Mario Bros.
P52

Combine the individual spirit of every Mario, some of the best 2D visuals you could want on a handheld, mechanics that define "platformer" in the truest, most creative sense, and you've got NSMB.

Our rating system

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the numbers alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. A perfect 10 represents a game that is flawless in the reviewer's opinion. Such a high standard means that 10s will be incredibly rare, but when it happens, it symbolizes that this game is the best, a modern classic.

10...Perfect
9...Extraordinary
8...Great
7...Good
6...Decent
5...Average
4...Below average
3...Poor
2...Bad
1...Terrible

System(s)	Xbox	Publisher	Dreamcatcher	Available	May
Developer	People Can Fly	Online/Multi	DM, Team DM, and various multiplayer powered by GameSpy	ESRB Rating	M

PAINKILLER HELL WARS

Thou shalt kill

words **Dave Halverson**

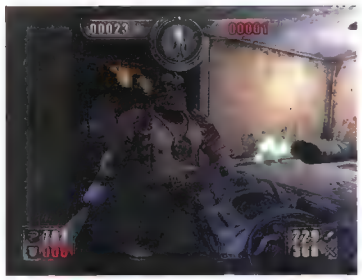
Four of Lucifer's generals are all that stand between you and ascension in Dreamcatcher's Painkiller Hell Wars, an FPS with a jet-black soul and a hunger for vengeance. Don't slide that Xbox under the bed just yet.

You—a.k.a. Daniel—begin the game after witnessing yours and your wife's death (nice driving, slick) in purgatory (the waiting room between heaven and hell where he's spent the last 30 years) where you're assigned your last task by one of the Lord's not-so-humble servants (I knew he'd be into the whole goth thing). Your diktat is to intercept the army that Lucifer has been systematically slipping into the region to mount a war and seize control of the realm, packed as it is with forgotten souls (the Krispy Kremes of the demon world). Before heading out, a word about Daniel: A cross between Fonzie and the Punisher, the guy looks like he's headed for the sock-hop at his 25-year high school reunion. For once I was actually relieved that my onscreen counterpart was represented by a swinging gun (and what wonderful guns they are). I kept wishing he'd get maimed or something, or run into one of Lucifer's tailors. Note to developers… Middle-age protagonists with receding hair lines need trench coats, dark eyes, massive jingling boots, and either a really cool hat or any haircut other than your average football coach.

To hell with him—a shooting we must go. The only thing standing between you and Lucifer's towering generals are his minions and these aren't your everyday moving targets. Beyond the game's introductory level, the minions become steadily fierce and…organized. At first you may be impressed that select hooded monks hold fast and hurl their axes rather than rush in, but such behavior is merely the first course of a demon buffet you won't soon forget. Amidst the cadavers in your direct vicinity, whose remains you're splattering all over the pretty gothic architecture, select enemy types launch brutal offensives, oft times working together. Flesh covered arachnids leap into the air to avoid fire; Satan's ninjas warp and spin, bloated chain-gunners swarm and take aim from above…and my favorite's the half-headed butchers that reach into their cadavers to grab and heave a pound of flesh. Mmmm. When you're not popping the heads off of lunging, blood-vomiting zombies and the like there's also work to be done. This is a shooter for sure, but one that is sufficiently layered for maximum enjoyment. Killing is one thing but hanging around to collect souls is another. Exploration is essential and encouraged. Ammunition is strategically placed along with holy artifacts, gold, and essence (creating a wicked balance) and each level has a goal that you don't discover until your first run through that unlocks various Black Tarot cards used to dispense special abilities and defensive measures (for a price of course, and gold is scarce).

Chain gunners like to attack in waves, and they're faster than they appear.

"When you're not popping the heads off of lunging, blood-vomiting zombies and the like there's also work to be done."



You'll also find Painkiller's weapons par for the unholy course featuring different levels of firepower and dual-action. I've grown especially fond of the stake gun which impales lesser demons with so much force that it propels them back shrieking in agony. The minions in Painkiller (the craftiest brood of hell mongers I've ever had the pleasure of sending home) really steal the show. Their calling card is heavy metal—with things dying down to ambient hymns in between—and you'll need to kill every last one to breach the next area and finally the general, so good luck with that. Painkiller's bosses are large—often towering—very angry, and they really HATE you. Prepare to battle each for several minutes.

Elsewhere, Havok 2.0 allows for inverse kinematics and deformable, interactive environments. Dangling bodies wriggle and contort in concert with your strikes (so fun to fiddle with the dead) and objects such as hanging crane hooks move when disturbed, not just side-to-side, but in accord with the angle they are disrupted. Beyond the obvious eye candy the designers also make good use of the Havok engine by way of elaborate chain reactions; cause and effect is your friend in PK.

Visually, People Can Fly play their hand well. Painkiller doesn't show its entire hand early, a mistake too many games make today. Rather, the game starts out looking good and spirals into downright inspired. The gothic architecture is to die for and the open expanses always feature mesmerizing animated skies. Cinemas play their part too, as Daniel receives help from a peculiar little demon—Smodius—and Eve (yes, *the* Eve). That Adam was one lucky bastard. No wonder he was so hungry. Turns out that if Daniel is killed by a general he goes to hell, but, if he can find an angel, to heaven he will go into the arms of his beloved Catherine (who he killed in a car accident). Maybe he should stay put.

My sole grievance with Painkiller (other than the fact that Daniel is such a tool) is that the control is a tad bouncy and the jump anything but precise. Trying to reach hidden armor by strategically leaping can be a frustrating endeavor. In FPS-land however, these are minor inherent quibbles. As a first-person shooter, Painkiller flat out excels, crucifying nearly all comers on Xbox. It's long, vastly replayable, the frame-rate is blistering, and it's anything but mindless. Amen. **play**

Painkiller: Hell Wars

score **8.5**

+ Spectacular character design, animation and AI. First rate gothic presentation and vast replayability.

– Daniel, the protagonist, deserves damnation for his wannabe Sears catalog attire and creepy-ass bug eyes. Slightly bouncy control.

Nothing say's "pop-me" like a bloated hell spawn.

System(s)	PS2, PSP	Publisher	Sega	Available	April
Developer	Sumo Digital	Online/Multi	6 player online	ESRB Rating	E

Outrun 2006
COAST TO COAST

Magical Drive Shower — Nick Des Barres

Some classic games are better left alone. They're simply too pure, and too specific to their time for a spiritually true update to be possible. I thought OutRun was one of these games. Delightfully, I was wrong. Sega-AM2 and UK-based Sumo Digital, who ported the original Chihiro-based OutRun 2 (on which OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast is based, along with the arcade-only OutRun 2 SP) to Xbox and added considerable flesh to its bones for this version, have utterly and totally nailed what OutRun was, and now, is.

There's just something so quintessentially 80s about cruising down the highway, the wind in your hair, the sights breezing by, your girl at your side, Magical Sound Shower on the radio. OutRun has always had an odd naïveté that comes straight from an earlier era, when nobody questioned the fact that one minute you're flying by the Pyramids, the next you're in San Francisco. It's this utter loopiness, this dream-like milieu and complete disregard for reality that makes OutRun OutRun, and thankfully 2006 preserves it intact.

2004's OutRun 2 on Xbox was very nice, a pleasant diversion that recalled the original game's spirit perhaps a little too closely. It's one thing to retain the absurdist flavor, but another entirely to leave the gameplay essentially unchanged. Eighteen years on, fifteen tracks and ten minutes of gameplay, however exhilarating, is just not going to cut it. In retrospect, Coast 2 Coast is an extravagant meal of apple-and-walnut salad, escargot en croûte, Boudin-style quenelle, and a nice 1981 Corton Charlemagne versus 2's meagre offering of twigs and leaves. The original 15 tracks are augmented by the all-new courses introduced in 2 SP, and all are raceable in reverse as well. Further, several new cars (all Ferraris, natch) have been added, along with a much more intuitive way of accessing all the various music remixes... but we'll get to that in a moment. What's amazing here is the content -- Sumo has taken AM2's assets and basically stretched them as far as the human mind can imagine. You want to play OutRun and deliberately smash into all the cars? Dodge falling meteors? Bounce beach balls around? Play 2's Heart Attack Mode with ever-changing and variable demands from your girlfriend? No problem, just boot up the main Coast 2 Coast mode and have a blast. If you're feeling old-school and want to breeze through the traditional ten-minute OutRun experience, OutRun 2 SP is available for you, perfectly emulated. Oh, and did I mention you can race against your pals online, for free?

...Like coming home again

Melding the entire experience together are "OutRun Miles" which are used to buy new cars, paint colors, music tracks, courses, etc. The brilliant thing here is that literally everything you do in the game earns you Miles, even if you only play for five minutes. This is a wonderful thing in a world when one often has to "commit" to sitting down and playing a game for a couple hours or so to feel one has made progress. In OutRun 2006, even the quickest of runs contributes to a greater whole. And should you happen to be fannish enough to buy the PSP version as well, you can pool your Miles (and progress in Coast 2 Coast mode) and continue to accrue on the road.

And what about those *visuals?* Have Sumo Digital's programmers made a pact with the dark lord himself? This is essentially a perfect port, 60fps progressive widescreen and all, of one of the prettiest Xbox games ever to be released. It may be ever-so-slightly jaggier, but when you're racing past giant Moai, or Machu Picchu, or Cape Canaveral, or the Golden Gate Bridge, you'll hardly notice. At this late stage in the PS2's life, it's probably safe to say that this is the best-looking racing game the platform is ever likely to see.

OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast is something of a triumph. Racing games today are largely about hyperfetishized real-world simulation, with gear ratios and proper exhaust notes of utmost importance. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in playing a *game.* A fanciful simulacrum of driving, like the good old days. This is as much of a game, as, say, Gradius -- a complete suspension of reality. It just happens to be based on a nonfiction concept. No car in the world handles like the Ferraris in OutRun, and that's beautiful. That's a symphony. That's a sunny day. If you're jonesing for old-school, demerara-sweet gameplay wrapped up in a shiny 21st century package, by all means, merge with OutRun 2006. **play**

"Sumo has taken AM2's assets and basically stretched them as far as the human mind can imagine."

Outrun 2006 Coast to Coast — score 9.0

Hitman: Blood Money

Death and rebirth

System	PlayStation 2, Xbox, Xbox 360, PC
Developer	IO Interactive
Publisher	Eidos

Online	None
Available	Now
ESRB Rating	M

Here's one thing the blood money won't buy: patience. With Eidos' latest foray into professional assassination, players will have to dig deep, wading through mission after mission of trial-and-error gameplay to hunt down a series of targets.

Hitman: Blood Money is the prettiest game in the Hitman series. It's also the most advanced in terms of what it gives to the player. Now, the killings have consequences beyond the scope of a single job. Waste suckers indiscriminately, leaving a lot of bodies and witnesses, and protagonist Agent 47's notoriety will rocket. Cash must then be spent to repair 47's anonymity (a "clean-up" job, if you will), or else it's likely the assassin will be identified on sight in future missions. This, more than anything else, gives the game a sense of realism that's not easily dismissed.

The game is designed for exploration and experimentation, with multiple approach points and means by which to dispatch targets. Missions, however, devolve into a sermon on death and rebirth, with the emphasis on not getting it right the first time (as a real hitman would need to do), but rather seeing what works and what doesn't—until thought and planning become fairly well irrelevant. **Greg Orlando**

Score 6.5

\+ Notoriety system makes the killing somehow seem relevant.

\- Trial-and-error play makes the proceedings seem less relevant.

Looks like they did chicken right.

Dreamfall: The Longest Journey

Enter Blandman

System	Xbox, PC
Developer	FunCom
Publisher	Aspyr

Online	None
Available	Now
ESRB Rating	M

The longest journey may well be the excruciating reach down to turn on the Xbox's power supply to play the third-person adventure Dreamfall. Although the game holds an intriguing and extremely likable protagonist in the plucky slacker Zoe Castillo, the rest of the game, in the gritty parlance of the streets, blows enormous monkey chunks. In Dreamfall's crazy lame world, you'll sneak around a killer robot only to have the dumb thing walk into a shower so it can be doused and destroyed, then travel to another location where you'll have to do almost the exact same thing, this time with a vicious dog.

You might be inclined to enjoy the game's off-kilter plot (it involves parallel universes and a grand conspiracy), but Dreamfall will have absolutely none of that and routinely switches its central character to keep things choppy and ill-paced. None of the other playable characters are half as charismatic as Zoe, and having to undertake their lame tasks may well reduce your intelligence quotient—permanently. Certainly it's no fun to play as the mysterious April and have to "solve" almost the exact same tonal puzzle that Zoe completed minutes before. Crap, thy name is Dreamfall: The Longest Journey. **Greg Orlando**

Part time protaganist, Zoe Castillo.

Score 3.5

\+ Likable protagonist.

\- Boring tasks, dumb scenarios.

DIGI COMICS

Metal Gear Solid

Digital Graphic Novel

Declassified information: Access granted

"To hell with purity! It's all about vision and how you go about it. PSP, Xbox Live, and handheld machines are the new frontier."

Ashley Wood MGS DGN Artist

words **Brady Fiechter**

[redacted]

Ashley Wood: From Popbot to Metal Gear Solid, artist extraordinaire

interview 1

Ashley Wood: Breaching the digital domain

You've been involved in the comic-book world for a while now. Is it newly invigorating to see your art given life in digital form?
AW: Absolutely, to see my style get animated is the greatest thing! Even though I have designed for games and movies, my actual style never really makes it to the final product, but with the Digital Graphic Novel, it's all there, every line and nuance.

I've only seen a teaser for the project, but I have to say the results look awesome.
Well I have seen a pretty much finished version, and it's stunning. It truly is the first digital comic, taking both traditional comic virtues and marrying them with the PSP's capabilities. Truly original, which we all know is pretty damn tough these days.

Metal Gear has created an impassioned following. You're working with some rich source material here...
Oh yeah, it's awesome – great story, killer designs, I'm happy!

Did you work very closely with Kojima?
Kojima-san overlooks everything, every page, and every cover.

What kind of impact could a medium like the PSP have on comic books in the future? There seems to be a possibility for some unique open-doors here... I'm stoked at the possibility of more comic-book artists creating material for digital sourcing.
Five years from now, digital graphic novels will outstrip traditional comics with the PSP and other handheld devices becoming available: the future of this new form is already on the way. It will offer huge leaps for creativity and completely reinvent the model of distribution. I for one will be there, holding high the revolutionary flag!

As a gamer, I'm aggressively drawn to art in digital form. I just love seeing images come to life on a screen. As a traditional comic-book artist, do you have any Luddite tendencies? Is there a purity to what you do that you want kept sacred?
Me a Luddite? I was born with Pong, and teethed on an Atari 2600 – tradition is what is keeping comics down. To hell with purity! It's all about vision and how you go about it. PSP, Xbox Live, and handheld machines are the new frontier. Five years from now, get back to me. I'll be there with my Comatics, and so will the world.

You're obviously brining your unique artistic sensibilities to the project. But how much did you have to research and stick to a specific Metal Gear template for the designs?
I know the universe backwards, I love it and respect it. I guess with the comic you're seeing it through Wood-colored glasses. I was never told to adhere to anything but the spirit of MGS!

Noriaki Okamura Producer
Metal Gear Solid: Digital Graphic Novel

interview 2

The phrase "new genre" is continually being dropped to label MGS Digital Comic. This industry loves safety... That's both risky and exciting, no?
You're right. The industry loves safety and MGS: DGN definitely goes against the grain. But it's vital for the industry to explore new avenues, and this game is a great new direction.

I'm very nervous about this project. I'm nervous about the reaction. Will users be receptive to such an original concept?

How do you get gamers to move beyond the need for constant action and aggressive stimulation and embrace something like this?
There are millions of gamers waiting for the next chapter in the Metal Gear Solid series, which of course is MGS4. That will definitely fulfill action fans' expectations. MGS: DGN was designed for fans of previous Metal Gear Solid games and for those looking for a fresh gaming experience. This game is a new way to play and remember the MGS1 story. And I really do mean "play." The game isn't formatted as a "UMD Movie" but is so integrated into the PSP hardware that it's classified as a "UMD Game."

I for one am hugely interested in more stuff like this. I think the idea of an interactive comic is something that is perfect for the PSP.
You're right. The detailed screen and great audio capabilities of the PSP make for a great digital graphic novel experience on a handheld. The widescreen also works very well for comic pages.

Maybe this is a bit of a stretch, but could you draw any parallels to Kojima's early work with Snatcher? Maybe not so much in the gameplay sense, but with the spirit of what you're trying to create...
I see where you're coming from. Mr. Kojima still is a big evangelist of the adventure-game genre and he never wants to see its era end. That's what Snatcher was born out of – love for the genre. MGS: DGN was born out of that same spirit – to do something new, to do something that is driven by great storytelling and cool art.

Hideo Kojima co-wrote the story, correct?
He is also a producer of MGS: DGN and, of course, the creator of the original MGS game.

Just how involved has he been?
He works as a normal producer does – he constantly checks the schedule, checks the quality of the game. He watches the video quality of the game closely and is very strict.

There seems to be a need to emphasize that there are interactive bits to the title.
Right. At any point within the MGS story, players can push the Square button to pause the action and scan deep inside the pages. This really needs to be seen to be believed. It's not as simple as the scanning functions of games like Metroid Prime. Players really dive into the pages and fly through layers of the comic, searching for and scanning key plot points. These items are then registered in the game's "Library" which players can later go back and piece together like a big puzzle. This is all done in 3D and it's very cool.

> "This game is a new way to play and remember the MGS1 story. And I really do mean "play."
>
> **Noriaki Okamura** MGS DCN Producer

It makes sense to have a comic-book given new life in a digital form, especially for a handheld hardware like PSP.
I think so too. It's very cool hardware so it makes sense that graphic-intensive projects find their way onto the platform. The hardware was a big inspiration for this game.

What prompted Kojima to take his universe into an interactive comic book realm?
3D gaming is so big right now. But there needs to be more artistic approaches to games, and that's what we're exploring. That isn't to say that 3D games can't be artistic, but it's sad when great game concepts get killed because they aren't for 3D games.

The big challenge at first was figuring out how to actually present the comics in a visually stunning way on the PSP. But Ashley Wood's art fit really well with the concept and I'm very happy with the final product. He and the MGS comic book publisher IDW were very interested in this project from the beginning.

Does an MGS Digital Comic-type title strike you as more appropriate for handheld than console?
Absolutely. It's like reading a book or listening to music on the bus. The genre that MGS: DGN is creating is another extension of that. Experiencing the digital graphics on the PSP with your headphones on makes much more sense to me rather than having it run on a next-gen system and hooking it up to an HD screen.

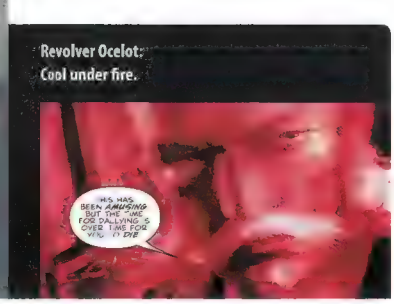
Why do you think something like this hasn't been explored before? Perhaps it didn't make sense till the PSP introduced a medium that was appropriate.
Other publishers haven't approached this idea because it's high risk. But I want to continue exploring it. We are really going for a different approach in gaming. This is just the start and we are definitely the pioneers.

I smell chapters to come if this works out...
We're waiting to see the response from MGS: DGN. If people like it, you can expect much more from us.

What about the title do you personally find most compelling?
The interactive portions are what really excite me. Diving through the pages and controlling the finder is really cool.

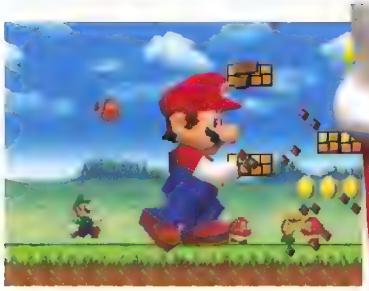
I believe that most people's mental pictures of digital graphic novels are very different. Trust me, you've never imagined a digital graphic novel could play like this. The movement of the graphics look incredible and you would have never thought it possible for Ashley Wood's art to be experienced like this.

Thank you for giving me the chance to talk about this cool new project! **play**



Systems:	NDS	Publisher	Nintendo	Available	May
Developer	Nintendo	Online/Multi	2-player	ESRB Rating	E

New Super Mario Bros.



words **Brady Fiechter**

To declare The New Super Mario Bros. the best in the series is like trying to decide if you like your firstborn son more than the little tykes that follow. Let's keep it simple and call the game a wonderful delight.

This latest Mario adventure draws from the spirit of every big Mario release to date, sticking to tried-and-true mechanics while adding in modern touches, some subtle and simple, some terrifically rich and imaginative; I love when Mario snatches up a mushroom that grows him the size of the screen, sending him off to topple everything in his destructive path. The entire game is essentially 2D, and that somehow makes inexorable sense to someone who's been raised on earlier Mario adventures. It just feels absolutely right from start to finish.

An overhead map traces out the many levels that comprise the quest. Once completing a stage, you move up like a piece on a boardgame to the next stop, occasionally diverting to bonus areas that are opened by collecting giant coins. The familiar level progression builds to a battle with baby Bowser before daddy Bowser gets his shot.

The New Super Mario Bros. is, of course, partly a game of collection while the clock ticks away. Coins are scattered about, but not in the predictable, mechanical way you often get in a procedural platformer. The gamemakers know how to test your mettle just enough that most leaps for the next spot of coins is tested through some sort of clever game design. Whether avoiding, falling, leaping, reversing, swinging or jumping in precarious ways, Mario is always engaging your classical gaming sense about as well as any 2D game could.

And it all looks great in the process. The DS is becoming the savior of lovely, old-school aesthetics, and The New Super Mario Bros. nails every little special detail you could imagine coming from a Mario game. Animation and color have never been this good, but beyond the overtly technical, the lovely nature of the craftsmanship is what finally sells this game as magic. In the very opening, when Bowser surreptitiously swipes the Princess, any Mario fan will smile in newfound satisfaction, ready to re-live, perhaps for the first time since that first time, what it's like to play a gem of a Nintendo game.

> "The New Super Mario Bros. nails every little special detail you could imagine coming from a Mario game."

New Super Mario Bros. score 9.5

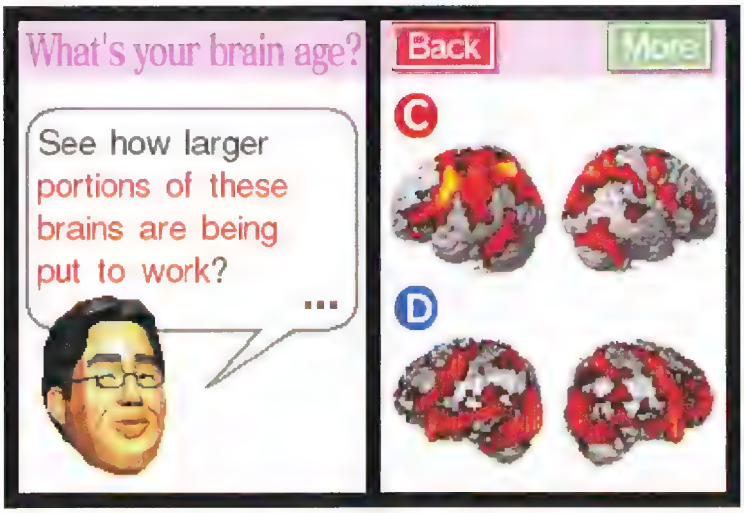
\+ Great [illegible] design [illegible] charm

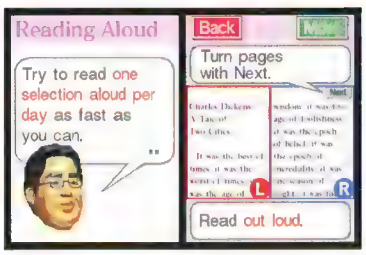
\- [illegible] battle [illegible] have been more varied

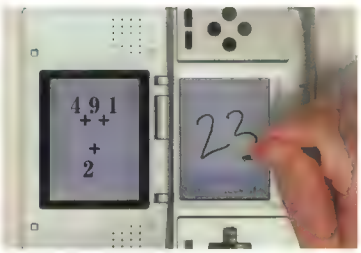
Brain Age

score 8.0

System	Nintendo DS	**Online/Multi**	Content download
Developer	Nintendo	**Available**	April
Publisher	Nintendo	**ESRB Rating**	E







Japanese neuroscientist Dr. Ryutu Kawashima gave me a little scolding last night, noticing that I had neglected a couple days of my brain training exercises. He's right: I definitely need more work if I'm ever going to get my brain age healthy and active. If you're sharp, you score a brain age of 20. Starting out, you might have to work to break the rusty age of 80.

Does Nintendo's prefrontal cortex stimulator Brain Age effectively massage the brain for a more lively noggin? According to Dr. Kawashima, who's used near-infrared spectroscopy to posit the answers, the answer would be yes, as the brain has been shown to increase blood flow and light up in specific regions while running through the Brain Age exercises. Effective or not, this is a uniquely engaging piece of interactive software—and it's 20 bucks.

I can feel my brain growing!

Using spoken word puzzles, memorization and various mathematical exercises, Brain Age uses an entertaining array of tests to track your score. The software recognition doesn't always detect your frantic inputs like you'd want, but the results are actually pretty accurate. You learn to work with the flaws, and this is one area where the game will draw some criticism: just how much of your success is based on learning the sequences rather than reacting organically to the questions? A moot point depending on your perspective, because like any good game, part of the fun is advancing the pattern recognition process and enjoying the growth of mastery.

Handwriting recognition can get a little difficult...

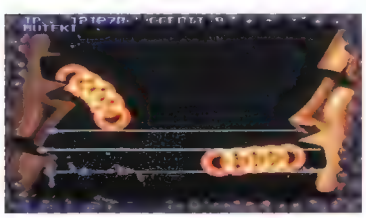
Gradius Collection

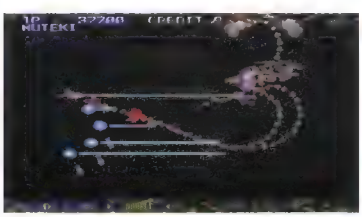
score 8.0

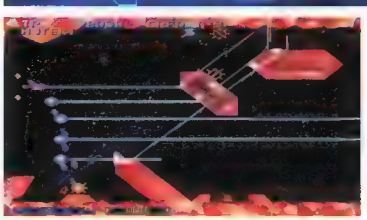
System	PSP	**Online/Multi**	NA
Developer	Konami	**Available**	May
Publisher	Konami	**ESRB Rating**	E

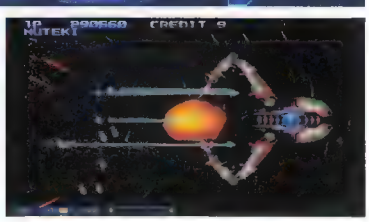
For every system a Gradius...or thereabouts. For the PSP Konami has assembled what would seem like the ultimate collection, and it's darn close, the only problem being the choice of formats. Stretched to fit the PSP's widescreen, the games appear uncomfortably distorted while scrunched, they seem N-Gage small. Still, given its grand old age, reaching back as far as 21 years, it's amazing how well the aesthetic holds up across each game, and there's simply no denying the instant allure once that trademark Gradius music starts up. The real prizes here, though, are Gradius II and Gradius Gaiden, which make their first appearance in the US along with a feast of never-before-seen extras. Add to that some new options, musical tracks and bonus movies. It's high time the side scrolling shooter returned, and imagining the possibilities by revisiting classics like this make us want that resurgence all the more...

So, up-up, down-down, left-left, right-right everyone!









System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Capcom	Available	Fall
Developer	Capcom	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	TBD

Ultimate Ghost 'n Goblins

Transmutation complete: side-scrolling is the next big thing

words **Dave Halverson**

Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins reaffirms everything I thought next-generation polygonal side-scrolling could be, and it barely nicks the surface of how deep the rabbit-hole could go. On top of remaking the classic gameplay and visuals in eye-popping 3D, the simple addition of neoteric essentials such as various weapons, magic, and armor—one shield type even acts as a hovering, controllable platform—and subtle design tweaks, such as the ability to grab ledges, adds unendingly to the genius of one of the most beloved classic franchises in gaming. So poppin' fresh is the gameplay that its impact is equal to the feeling you get booting up a next-gen title for the first time. Traditional 3D gameplay is virtually as passé as conventional 2D was back when the PS retired it. The advent of 3D side-scrolling is a more substantial leap in fun than the move from current-gen third-person and FPS to the next—irrefutable proof that it's high-time side-scrolling mounted a serious comeback.

How I've missed gameplay that prods and challenges, requiring you to make split-second decisions based on premeditation. Where modern games have become more or less interactive adventures, a good side-scroller is still like boot camp for your brain.

The most substantial changes (other than the obvious technological and design strides) in the traditional G 'n' G genome are more frequent checkpoints or 'rematerializing' points, along with the ability to save after each level—a luxury we only dreamt about in 2D's heyday, when an hour-long game took weeks to beat. Due to the arcade nature of console ports, side-scrollers past were designed to drain maximum coinage by making make you memorize every last pattern in the game, where nowadays the emphasis is on easing frustration and adding replay value. Ultimate G 'n' G delivers both. Here you need only master small areas at a time but the feeling of achievement still looms. If you can beat Ultimate G 'n' G on "Ultimate" you're indeed one talented son of a knight. Another milestone is the new leveling system and branching level design. Once an area is saved you can revisit it at any time using Sir Arthur's earned capabilities to expose multiple arteries and sub-missions. Replayability, sterling visuals (that traditional 3D will never achieve), and gameplay that will awaken the dormant gamer in us all makes this a celebration of what mobile gaming has become and what next-gen console gaming will one day hopefully be.

"...its impact is equal to the feeling you get booting up a next-gen title for the first time."

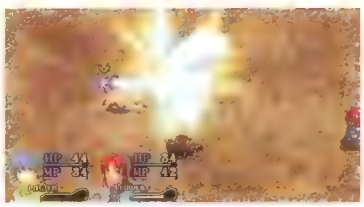
Legend of Heroes 2: Prophecy of the Moonlight Witch

score 8.0

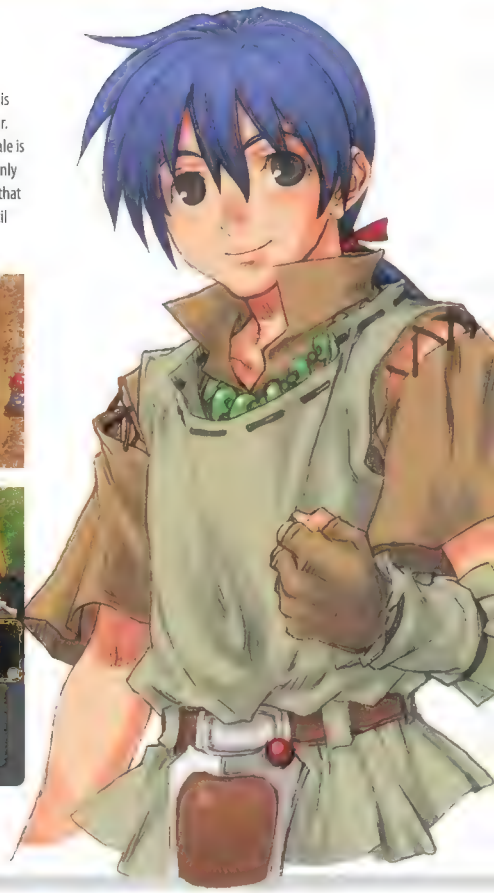
System	PSP	**Online/Multi**	None
Developer	Microvision/Falcom	**Available**	May
Publisher	Namco Bandai	**ESRB Rating**	E

I don't remember exactly the right of passage I went through back when I was a teenager, but I'm sure it was far less interesting, not to mention more embarrassing, than what Jurio and Chris get to experience. In Legend of Heroes 2, the duo set out from their quiet mountain village to see the world and find the five magic mirrors, so that they may prove themselves and return as adults.

If LoH2 was judged solely on its core gameplay, it would be a fun, yet linear RPG that could benefit greatly from a bit more originality and development. What then makes this game so special, though, is a storyline and characters that suck you in and refuse to let go. After countless RPGs that have kicked off by telling me I have yet another world to save, this simple journey of self discovery was like a breath of fresh air. The banter between Jurio and Chris is hilarious, and their tale is filled with humor, adventure, sorrow, and drama, marred only by instances of sloppy translation. This is the kind of game that once you pick up, you aren't going to want to put down until you find out what happens next. **Eric L. Patterson**



The anime-style dialogue boxes serve the game well.



Tomb Raider: Legend

score 7.0

System	PSP	**Online/Multi**	NA
Developer	Crystal Dynamics	**Available**	May
Publisher	Eidos	**ESRB Rating**	T

Tomb Raider: Legend is an impressive technical achievement on PSP, mirroring the console versions closer than you might think. By now the handheld's power is certainly not in question, but here we have one of those situations where porting down to a single-analog control structure and smaller screen diminish the scope and impact of the original game's intent. Yet despite the fluidity and grace of Lara's console adventures losing their strength, the game's fantastic level design and sense of adventure elevate the experience. But there's just no reason to return to Legend if you've already taken the journey on console. **Brady Fiechter**

Not bad for a handheld...

preview Loco Roco

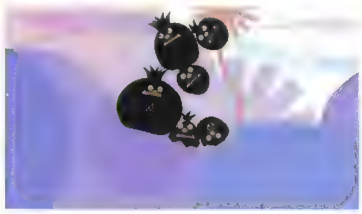
System(s)	PSP	**Publisher**	SCEA
Developer	Sony	**Available**	June

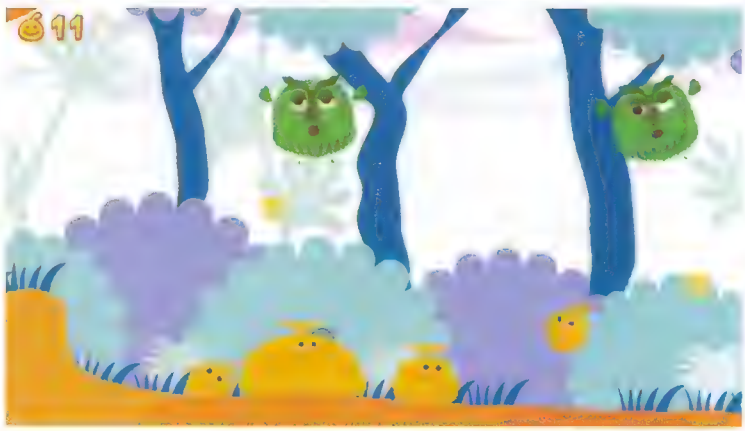
A developer friend of mine wouldn't shut up about this game he had access to called Loco Roco. You see, he's a bitter chap for the most part, hopelessly critical of the competition and most games in general. "When you play it, you will once again have faith in your PSP," he said. So I did, and he was right.

Sony granted us a one-level teaser of the delightfully strange Loco Roco at a pre-E3 gamers day. Not enough to pass too much judgment, but more than enough to fall in love with the vacantly smiling blob Loco Roco as he bounced, dripped, flopped, rolled and poured his way through an obstacle course of trippy colors and vibrant scenery.

I guess you'd call it a platformer, but one that's been outfitted to place the emphasis on physics-driven character locomotion over enemy encounters and precarious jumping. Loco Roco is like a viscous, moving gum-drop, tossed around the environment as you manipulate the screen with the shoulder buttons, changing the positioning of paths before you. The hungry guy likes to gorge on fruits, which expand his girth as the level progresses. You may come across a giant slope, tilt the screen, send Loco Roco shooting off the ramp and into a little nook, sheering him into little pieces as they drip into the next cave-like section. It's an endearing and infectiously casual feeling experiencing Loco Roco. As for how it'll all hold up over an entire game… **Brady Fiechter**

A large stoned monolith blocks a flock of chicken things. That's not weird.





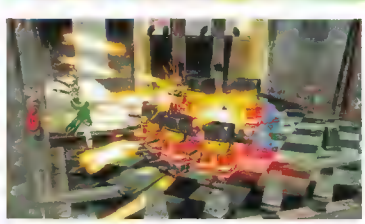
preview Power Stone Collection

System(s)	PSP	**Publisher**	Capcom
Developer	Capcom	**Available**	Winter 2006

Much more fun than a kidney stone, Capcom's wacky beat-'em-ups Power Stone and Power Stone 2 have been packaged, shrunk, and ported to Sony's PSP. The thrashings and also the smitings should commence in fine fashion at the end of the year.

Power Stone and its sequel appeared on both the Sega Dreamcast and in arcades. The series was notably for its frantic 3D multiplayer battles, goofy weaponry, and multitiered stages; the games took their names from the special powerups players were encouraged to collect during play. For the Collection, Capcom has added a host of features, new weapons for the characters to use, modes, and ad hoc play for two players for Power Stone and four for Stone 2. With multiplayer fights, friends can use game sharing, meaning only one Collection UMD will suffice for all parties.

Among the new goodies are a Bomber Battle minigame for Power Stone 2, a training mode, a new camera system to optimize gameplay for the PSP's screen, a screen shot mode wherein play can be paused and a permanent record of someone's beatdown created, and four characters from Power Stone 2 brought over to the original game's roster. **Greg Orlando**



Not so long ago this was cutting edge 3D

ATV Offroad Fury Pro

System(s)	PSP	**Publisher**	SCEA
Developer	Climax	**Available**	October 2006

Sequel check: ATV Offroad Fury Pro continues all the expected features, stylings and general feel of the solid series. One big addition is the 30 new vehicles, which now include, for the first time, the likes of buggies, trucks, and MX bikes. A smattering of old tracks will be reintroduced, along with the 64 newbies to keep you busy. For the hardcore of you who plan on owning ATV 4 on PS2, a cross-connection function is being included, granting you shared access to circuits, vehicles and online options. **Brady Fiechter**

From Russia With Love

score 6.0

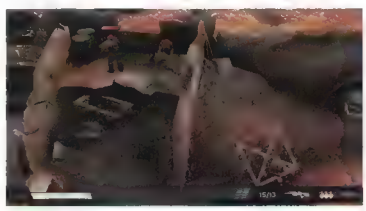
System(s)	PSP	**Publisher**	EA
Developer	EA Redwood Shores	**Available**	April

Stripped down and limply recycled from the already lackluster PS2 version of From Russia With Love, this latest Bond action title is crippled by more than inconsistent designs; the control scheme just never feels passable. Some may come to acceptable grips with commanding the virtual Sean Connery through his spy-driven shootouts, enjoying the many gadgets and Bond aesthetics—highlights are the slick settings—but there's no accepting the boring simplicity that quickly stalls the experience. From Russia With Love does add in a few good ideas, like the "focus" targeting and retro-Bond flavorings that set up some clever scenes, but you'll have to put up with a lot of fodder to find any reward. **Brady Fiechter**

Killzone: Liberation

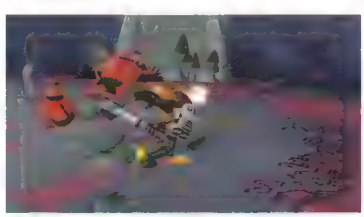
System(s)	PSP	**Publisher**	SCEA
Developer	Guerilla	**Available**	Q4 2006

Contained in the same crumbling world that defined Killzone and continuing the battle with the Helghast, Killzone: Liberation wisely puts you in a third-person perspective for the PSP. The game begins 2 months after the events in Killzone, revealing a deepening war that has cast aside any rules of ethical engagement. You're on a mission to rescue hostages, deploying various grades of weaponry based on real-life military equipment. **Brady Fiechter**

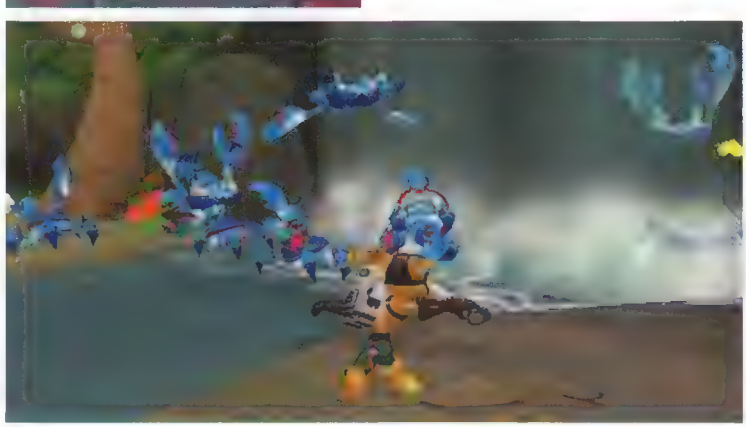


Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters

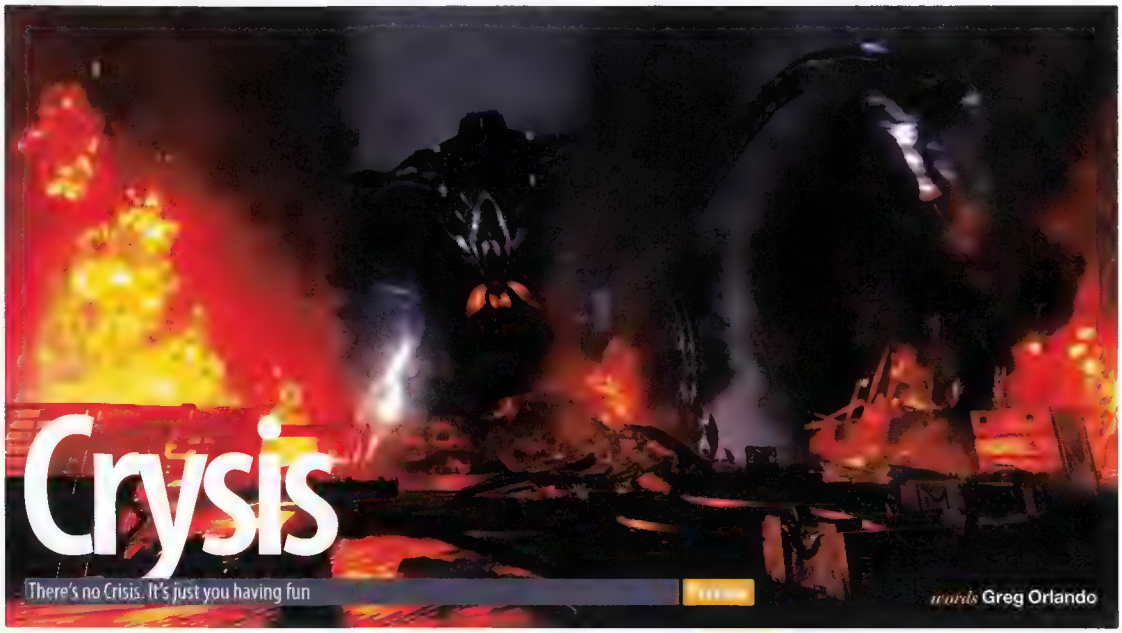
System(s)	PSP	**Publisher**	SCEA
Developer	High Impact Games	**Available**	June



In the latest Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters, Ratchet and Clank are on vacation. But as we all know, not even a hero can get away from hero stuff, so when the discovery of a race of inventors brings trouble to town… well, you know what trouble means: destructive wrenches and collecting nuts and bolts, vehicular mayhem and armor, weapons like the Agents of Doom and Shrink Ray. **Brady Fiechter**



Developer	Crytek	Publisher	Electronic Arts
Multiplayer	TBA	Available	TBA



"Crysis rocks in the manner of a paper boat on the high seas."

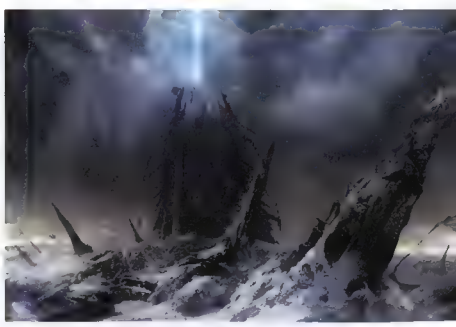
Remember when pugilist "Iron" Mike Tyson wasn't being properly medicated and ran around claiming he would eat other boxers' children? Well, Crytek's new first-person shooter Crysis may well be the Tyson of video games, a monster of a title poised to crush all in its path and possibly gobble a child or two in the process.

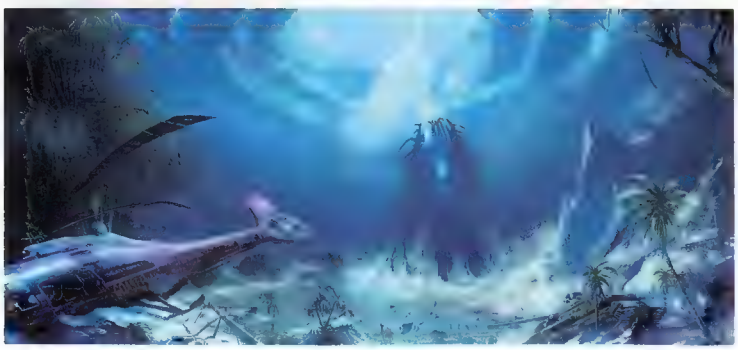
This is not hyperbole: Crysis rocks in the manner of a paper boat on the high seas. When Cevat Yerli, president and CEO of Crytek—maker of Far Cry—speaks of Crysis, it's in absolutes. "We want to deliver the most intelligent, credible enemies ever," he says. "We want this to be 'A'-class."

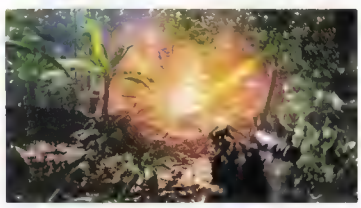
Crysis tells the story of a supersoldier in a war against alien invaders. During play, the soldier's abilities can be altered to increase his strength, speed, or resiliency. This means that when he's storming through a wrecked aircraft carrier, he'll need to boost his muscle capacity to lift fallen girders and free his trapped comrades, then quickly shift the focus to his toughness in order to resist the flames in a burning corridor—or else increase his speed to zip past the fire without dying. Every choice in Crysis will have its own consequence, Yerli promises, and saving certain people from horrible fates may well alter the game's conclusion, creating perhaps a more palatable ending.

Graphical niceties are piled one on top of another to create an extremely pretty Crysis. The game features motion blur, depth of field, volumetric clouds, real-time ambient maps, soft shadows, and destructible environments. Jargon aside, it's possible to peer through a bush's branches to see enemies, knock down trees in a jungle and have the falling timber crush a nearby target, and then pause briefly to marvel in awe at how a gigantic monster's roar impacts nearby pillars of smoke and fire. The game's levels are designed to punctuate the environmental effects—one is set in the jungle, another in a frozen waste, a third on a doomed human carrier, and the ultimate level takes place on the alien's home ship itself.

Crytek is serious about Crysis and it shows. Rumors of a console version for Crysis are just that; Yerli simply won't conceive of such a thing just yet. "It's purely about focus," he says. And one brief look at the game's protagonist locked in combat against a mechanical, laser-spitting behemoth in which the screen fairly dances with smoke and flame is proof positive of the company's intent. It may well be that Crysis emerges as another seminal title in the FPS genre.







Crytek's new engine boasts staggering detail.

Developer	Mythic Entertainment	Publisher	Mythic Entertainment
Multiplayer	Persistent online	Available	2007

Warhammer Online
Age of Reckoning

words **Mike Griffin**

We recently engaged an early playable demo of Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning (WAR) at Mythic Entertainment's headquarters. The game's ambitiously multi-discipline design—thanks to the vault of Games Workshop data and lore—earned an emphatically positive first impression. Imagine an art style and world design in the vein of WoW, but with an attitude and violence rooted in brutal and sardonic Brit-mutated high fantasy: a world where colossal warfare is a gleeful way of life.

This 25-year old fantasy empire has over one million active players out there, still regularly purchasing and painting Warhammer miniatures and battling friends. So there's a built-in audience with rather informed expectations. WAR's pleasantly eccentric Design Manager Paul Barnett, of Games Workshop, explains, "It's this odd IP about moving little men on tables, rolling dice and fighting. And we sell like 100 million little soldiers a year…then Mythic came along and said, 'Hey, we wouldn't mind having a go at the franchise online.'"

Paul and Mythic CEO Mark Jacobs had known each other for several years, and Paul knew of Mythic's success with Dark Age of Camelot. "A good track record makes us happy," he chirps. "Usually we go to games people and say 'Have you done this before?' And they go, 'Yes!' And we say, 'And were you any good?' 'Yes!' And we say, 'Do you care about what we're going to give you?' 'Yes!'

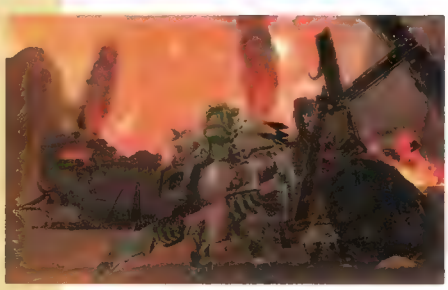
> "...the game's sprawling geography is laced with pockets of war."

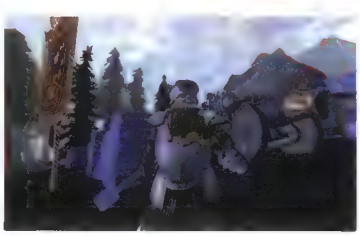
Right, then we *might* let you play with our toy soldiers. But with Mythic, we knew their people had the ability and the passion right away." And this passion for realm-versus-realm gameplay forms the backbone of a world in conflict.

Player-versus-environment and player-versus-player gameplay are closely interwoven in Warhammer Online's proposed global vision. There will be safe zones to engage in PvE quests without worrying about getting ganked by higher-level players. Other types of quests will take players to riskier open PvP zones. The game's Producer Lance Robertson offers: "And it's not about collecting seven lizard heads for some abstract reward. It's about going out and disrupting your enemy's supply lines." Sometimes this will involve collaborative zone-wide quests. WAR will also have PvP gameplay quests in what Mythic classifies as the "red zone". The ultimate goal here is to dominate the battle and capture enemy cities. The state of the battlefield will make it pretty obvious that you're entering a major battle zone, and with several armies, from human, dwarf and elf, to orc, goblin and chaos warrior, the game's sprawling geography is laced with pockets of war. Some factions, such as the humorously crude orc and goblin nation, go to war simply for the sake of battle and slaughter. Mythic's goal is to ensure that racial tension is felt right away no matter what side you choose, with players aware of ongoing battles in their own lands, across shared world space and inside elite instanced areas.

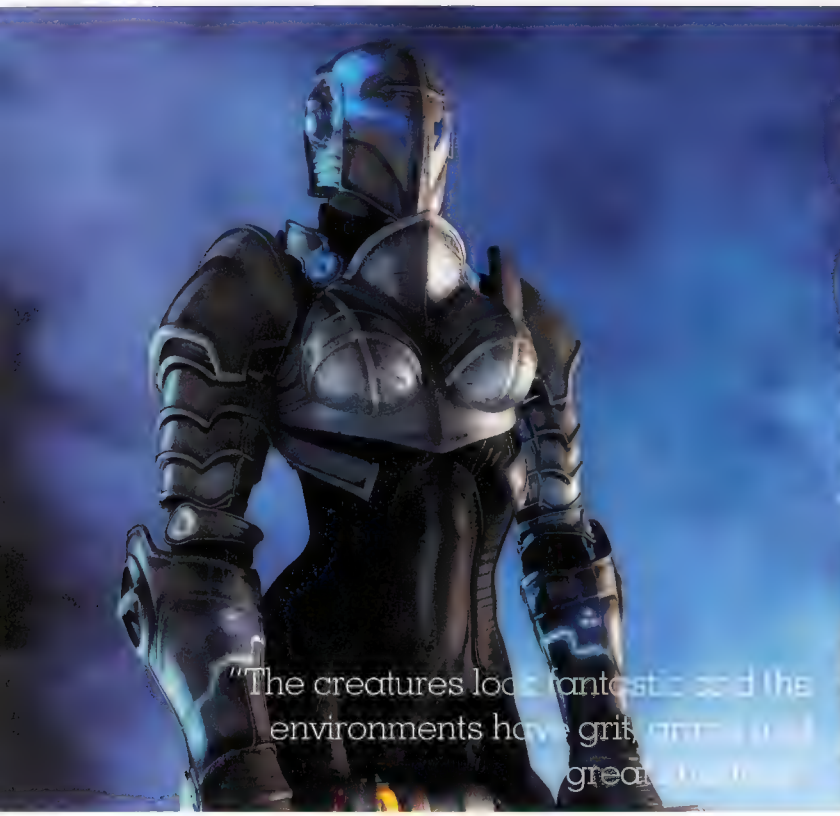
Warhammer Online is looking good in its early alpha phase. The game employs a stylized cartoon-ish aesthetic in its visuals, as opposed to the more realistic proportions and bump-glossed treatment of an EQ 2 or Vanguard. Poly-count and texture resolution are generally much higher than WoW, and we noted well-implemented Dx9 tricks—such as depth of field—enhancing stuff like draw distance and world lighting. The team is going the extra mile by including evolving character models; for example, a Warrior's physique will become noticeably more buff as he grows stronger. All classes will have three to five archetypes, each with idiosyncratic evolution.

Warhammer Online presents many big ideas for realm-versus-realm gameplay that may prove to be very interesting in a full-scale MMO. The game's deep lineage, oddball spirit and fantastic potential for world design ensure that we keep close tabs on its progress.





Heavily armored dwarf infantry are grim and unrelenting.



Hellgate: London

PREVIEW 2006

Developer	Flagship Studios	Publisher	Namco Bandai
Multiplayer	Co-op online	Available	October

words **Mike Griffin**

Hellgate: London looks better than ever. The vets on the Flagship team understand how to balance randomly-generated levels and items with meaningful static challenges. They've created an addictive system of item modification and a combat system with more first-person shooter elements and a blend of stat-based and [illegible] gaming that does not require [illegible] Mountain Dew to excel at. And while Hellgate stands tall as a single-player game, guiding one's templar through demonic forces in post-apocalyptic London can also be convened online, cooperatively with friends. Most impressively, the visuals are extremely detailed in Hellgate: London. The creatures look fantastic and the environments have grit, grime and great shaders. Shaping up to be one of the year's best releases.

Mage Knight Apocalypse

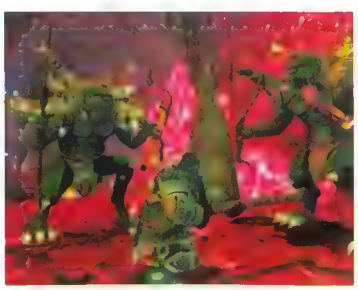
2006

Developer	IS Games	Publisher	Namco Bandai
Multiplayer	1-5p Co-op	Available	May

words **Mike Griffin**

Namco Bandai is re-investing in PC gaming this year and it kicks off in fine form with Mage Knight Apocalypse, an intense, good-looking action RPG based on the Mage Knight role playing miniatures game. MKA revolves around the story of five different would-be heroes, each with a unique back story that IS Games has cleverly spread across the proposed 25-30 hour campaign experience. Regardless of the character you choose to play, you'll be joined by the other four heroes as you progress through the game, witnessing events—from different perspectives—as nations march to war. Meanwhile, the game's end boss, the five-headed Apocalypse Dragon, slowly closes-in.

Main protagonists include a dwarf, barbarian, elf, vampire and drake-like hybrid, and naturally they each come with unique ability paths. Raising a skill occurs through usage in combat: cast a spell and that spell casting ability improves, swing a sword and that weapon proficiency increases. MKA will also feature traditional action RPG goodness like weapon customization (think slotted stone powers) and thousands of equippable items. Online modes will include a full co-op campaign for up to five players and extra challenges like an endurance-type mode where hordes of creatures (some quite large) roll in like tidal waves.



Warhammer: Mark of Chaos

PREVIEW 2006

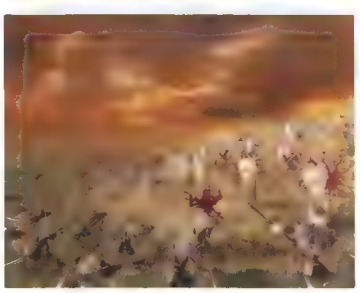
Developer	Black Hole Entertainment	Publisher	Namco Bandai
Multiplayer	Co-op and battle	Available	Fall 2006

words **Mike Griffin**

Rounding out Namco Bandai's power trio on PC is Warhammer: Mark of Chaos, in development at Black Hole Games. This is one of the most attractive strategy titles we'll see this year, with deep customizability and striking terrain and characters.

Mark of Chaos will fill the battlefield with thousands of combatants from four main selectable armies: the human Empire, ghastly Chaos, rat-like Skaven and old school elf-like High Elves. Though W:MoC will classically fall into the RTS category, players can spend an appreciable amount of time customizing their army instead of micromanaging resources. Indeed, the resources here—as per Warhammer MO—directly involve the battlefield action. Taking over an objective will yield points to spend on new and improved units. You can swap armor, weapons, body parts, and even paint your units and customize the banners they march into battle. Obviously none of this is pre-requisite to diving right into the fight, but it's cool to have so much optional control over the state of your army.

The visually arresting Warhammer: Mark of Chaos will have a variety of multiplayer modes—including a custom co-op campaign—when it ships this fall.



Titan Quest

2006

Developer	Iron Lore	Publisher	THQ
Multiplayer	1-6p co-op	Available	June

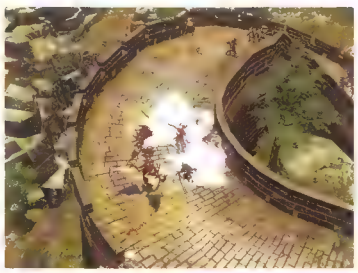
words **Mike Griffin**

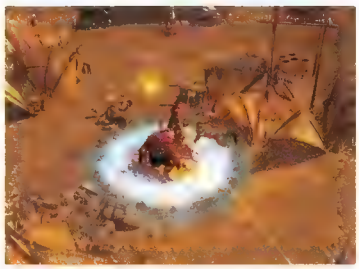
Titan Quest is arriving in June, and THQ is really pushing hard to make it a success. Time spent with a pre-final version of the game reveals an extremely solid, stable and well-animated action RPG from the co-creator of Age of Empires. The old gods, the Titans, have escaped eternal imprisonment. It's time to hunt them down—with the help of the new gods—across ancient Greece and Egypt.

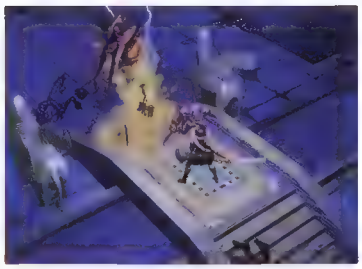
This is the kind of true-school PC action RPG that Diablo fans will adore, while the click-fire action, UI, stats and skills tree should be comfortably familiar to any RPG player. The game has a ton of ways to equip and customize your character. You can also check out some interesting metrics at any time, such as: highest damage dealt, monsters killed, greatest monster killed. With twenty-eight total combinations of skills and spells, experimentation is encouraged, whether poking spears, tossing lightning or laying trap decoys to lure monsters.

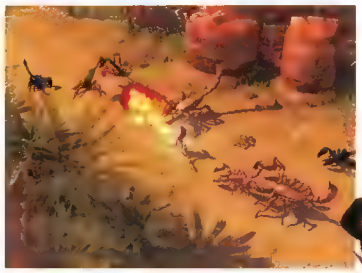
Titan Quest has been crafted with high production values. TQ has excellent textures, really great animations and nice bits of reactive flora. The game's streaming world is impressively seamless, and there's a great sense of altitude (using overlooks to evoke depth and distance) and correlation across—and below—the ancient mythological lands.

With an optional six-player story driven campaign and over one thousand unique item drops, Titan Quest should have much to offer the epic action RPG player this summer.









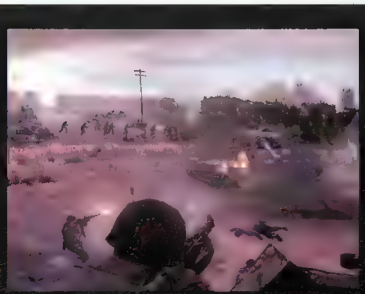
Those are some doggone big teeth.

Company of Heroes

2006

Developer	Relic	Publisher	THQ
Multiplayer	1-8p LAN/Online	Available	October

Undoubtedly the most detailed WW2 RTS to date.



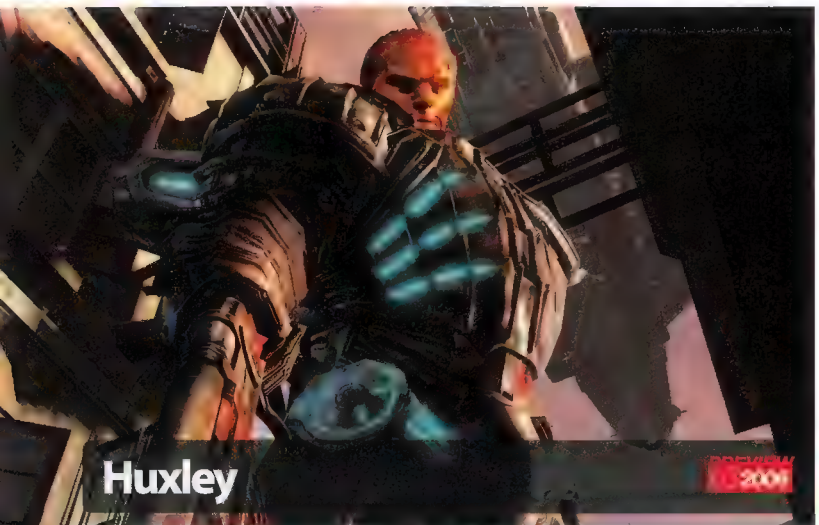
words **Mike Griffin**

Relic's Company of Heroes intends to be deeper and more sophisticated than any WW2 real-time strategy title before it, and it all revolves around destructible and deformable environments and artificial intelligence that adapts to changing conditions.

The Company of Heroes campaign presents a slice of World War 2 that focuses on the fictional Able Company, an under-experienced and undermanned group of Allied soldiers that must penetrate German lines using superior tactics. CoH's multiplayer game will let players take control of both Axis and Allied forces. While Relic adheres to certain realistic elements of WW2-era geography and history, they've taken some liberties with the pacing of events and layout of environments to make for better, more intense real-time strategy gaming. This way it's more satisfying when you blow stuff up.

Cover fire is the lifeblood of CoH's gameplay. Adapt to your environment or modify it to suit your needs, all in the name of avoiding fire. NPC troops will use foliage, walls, vehicles, grave stones, and even bomb craters as cover. The battlefield itself takes a beating and changes composition as Relic's powerful engine features full destructibility. Get rid of the enemy's cover fire, and he is yours. Some locations will be held as strongholds, and holding territory accounts for most of CoH's streamlined resource management.

Company of Heroes will introduce its dynamic battlefields and environmental strategy in late 2006.



Huxley

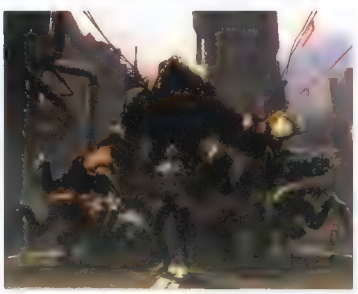
PREVIEW 2006

Developer	Webzen	Publisher	Webzen
Multiplayer	Persistent online	Available	Q4 2006

words Mike Griffin

Huxley continues to tantalize gamers with its drop-dead gorgeous post-apocalyptic visuals, lending further credence to the power of the third Unreal suite. It must be noted that unlike the usual tweaks a developer will apply to a licensed engine, producer Kijong Kang and his Huxley team have injected the Unreal Engine 3 with a massive dose of modification to support the game's large online scale. We're talking claims of several thousand players co-habiting Huxley's towns simultaneously in one shared visual space, and in the range of many hundreds in its battle zones, duking it out twitch-style—a la Quake or Unreal, on very potent MMO steroids. Considering the staggering detail on the Huxley character models we've seen thus far, the engine is either ridiculously effective at culling detail and polygons when needed, or Webzen have performed a miracle of engine and netcode optimization. At any rate, this persistent online blend of first person shooter and role playing game boasts many lofty goals.

"...fighting for your side earns you rank and enhances your character's RPG-style leveling path."



The proof is in the pudding, as they say, and a large percentage of Huxley's gameplay will involve privately-spawned, high quality campaign-style missions where performance will be brisk. The team has suggested that enemy AI quality in these missions will be closer to Half-Life 2 than hit MMO, and such a feat would be a blessing indeed in the online space—where AI and pathfinding are usually low on sophistication.

Players will be drawn to Huxley's full-fledged online combat, however. There's a war for resources brewing between the Sapiens and Alternatives, and fighting for your side earns you rank and enhances your character's RPG-style leveling path. And that leads to nicer equipment, better licenses and bigger vehicles to drive into combat. This game should be a highlight title on anyone's must-have list for PC and Xbox 360 in late 2006.

Battlefield 2142

PREVIEW 2006

Developer	DICE	Publisher	Electronic Arts
Multiplayer	32-64p team assault	Available	Q4 2006

words Greg Orlando

When a new ice age makes most of the Earth unlivable, two factions will agree to disagree, by which it is meant they will kill one another for control. Battlefield 2142 brings the war into the not-too-distant future for an intriguing look at the killing we might be doing 136 years from now.

T-39 battle walkers, two man mechanical terrors, tear up nearby soldiers before being brought down by EMP-like grenades that disrupt their functions and make them vulnerable. A gun drone, a tiny killing machine, encircles a team leader's head. It's a powerful defensive tool when the enemy is close, but it's also a floating target that marks the leader's position to enemy snipers. Overhead, enormous ships called Titans rain down death from above. Soldiers using special rocket pods launch from the ground to land on the ship to assault the Titan's reactor. When the Titan explodes, soldiers leap gracefully off the dying ship, somehow surviving the fall in a manner the developer has not yet revealed.

Sixty-four player battles are supported, and 32 would-be soldiers can compete in a special Titan vs. Titan assault-style mode where the goal is to blow up the other guy's ship. Take the war online later this year.

"...brings the war into the not-too-distant future for an intriguing look at the killing we might be doing 136 years from now."

The Witcher

PREVIEW E3 2006

Developer	CD Projekt	Publisher	CD Projekt
Multiplayer	None	Available	2007

words **Mike Griffin**

The Witcher's striking art is featured at E3 2006's "Into the Pixel" art expo.

CD Projekt is a powerful, yet unassuming developer and publisher. Founded in 1994, the company hit it big in Eastern Europe as a localization and distribution specialist, porting a string of phenomenal RPG success stories like Baldur's Gate, Heroes of Might and Magic IV, Neverwinter Nights and Diablo. They now have virtually all of Ubisoft, Sega, Vivendi and Konami's biggest titles in their line-up. Feeling fortified and stable in 2003, CD Projekt decided it was time to go ahead with a longstanding plan: game development. A Triple-A caliber studio is meticulously assembled, concepts are confirmed, and action RPG The Witcher becomes the studio's first game project/projekt.

The Witcher is the fiction of celebrated fantasy author Andrzej Sapkowski. His tough-as-nails protagonist is Geralt the monster slayer, haunted protector and hunter in a dark and unforgiving medieval world—set to be realized in-game using a heavily-modified Aurora Engine. Re-worked lighting and shader models, superior complexity, and a vastly improved renderer compliment the RPG expertise of Bioware's capable engine.

A great deal of effort is going into The Witcher's real-time combat, with position and momentum wired into RPG stats and fast tactical action as the ultimate goal. CD Projekt enlisted a few of Poland's top sword masters, stuntmen and martial artists for melee motion capture sessions. Criterion's Karma physics suite will help to simulate weight and impact in Geralt, his foes and the environment.

The Witcher will have benefited from a lengthy development cycle leading up to its early 2007 release, and CD Projekt intends to prove it was time was spent: tons of branching quests, secrets, critical plot-altering outcomes, and multiple endings should add value to this expansive single-player adventure.

"...tons of branching quests, secrets, critical plot-altering outcomes, and multiple endings."

Maelstrom

PREVIEW E3 2006

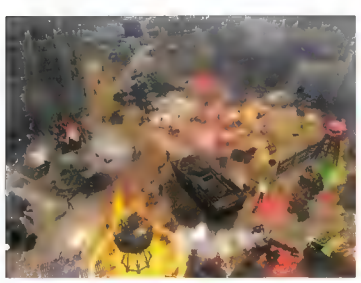
Developer	KDV/Codemasters	Publisher	Codemasters
Multiplayer	TBA	Available	Fall 2006

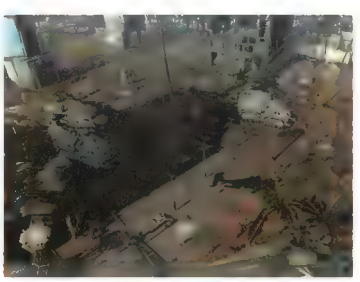
words **Mike Griffin**

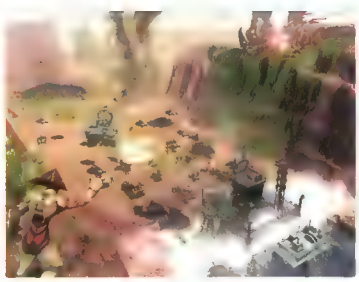
We liked 2004's Perimeter, also from developer/publisher combo KDV and Codemasters, though it suffered from rather steep system requirements. Like Perimeter, the makers' upcoming real-time strategy effort Maelstrom will feature a hybrid voxel/polygonal graphics engine and an organic landscape that can be terraformed in the midst of frenetic combat.

Maelstrom takes place almost 45 years in the future on a ravaged Earth where water has become the most valuable commodity. Though humans were doing a terribly fine job destroying natural resources through warfare, it is an alien invasion that triggers the worldwide ecological disaster. Now high-tech humans continue to battle each other for survival (Remnants vs. Ascension) while waging a war against the Alien invaders. The alien factor adds a welcome twist to the quickly-becoming-ubiquitous futuristic game motif of Earth's nations battling for war-reduced natural resources. This is supposed to be a *fictional* portrayal of the future, after all!

The terraforming in Perimeter was sort of hands-off, as you issued commands then allowed thousands of intelligent nano robots to complete the earth-sculpting tasks. In Maelstrom, you'll actually get to control a Constructor's terrain modification beam and re-shape the topography yourself, up close and personal. KD-Vision's engine technology is really cool and organic, kind of procedurally re-shaping the lay of the land in dramatic fashion—trenches and valleys morphing into existence, affecting units, physics and water.







When ultramodern weaponry and alien terraforming collide.

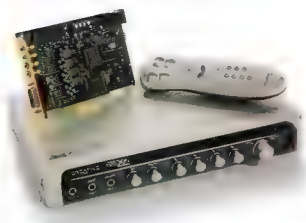
Up to this point, you're probably thinking, "Ok, seems like a cool RTS, but..."—and that need for greater substance inspired Codemasters to hire Massive Black, a busy film and game outsourcing studio, to oversee all of Maelstrom's storyline. The head writer on Maelstrom comes from a background penning Star Trek: Voyager episodes, so there's some TV sci-fi pedigree in this RTS narrative.

We expect to hear multiplayer details soon. Maelstrom will carve into retail this fall.

ask alienware

no. 003 // june 2006

Q. I recently installed a 5.1 system in my PC room for occasional movie viewing, and I'm thinking about upgrading my Audigy 2 sound card to something more advanced like the X-Fi. Unfortunately I don't see many PC games that support 5.1 surround. Most are just "Dolby Digital". Also I don't see very much support for EAX 4 and other effects stuff for gaming. So is there a big reason to upgrade my sound card? J.P., Sudbury ON.



Alienware: There is definitely a benefit to upgrading to the latest-generation sound card for all of your entertainment, whether watching a movie or playing a game. The latest sound cards with X-Fi technology deliver incredibly realistic surround sound, whether using surround sound speakers or wearing headphones/earbuds (that isn't just marketing fluff; it *is* realistic). Even if a game is not optimized for specific audio technologies, X-Fi enhances the audio output of games, music, and movies at a software level to give you the crispest audio experience available. This new technology allows for an accurate depiction of where you opponent is, without even seeing them! Who has the advantage now?

Q. I intend to add a wi-fi modem and router to my computer. It will free up some wires and also allow my son to use his Nintendo DS online. The online games we play (CoH, WoW) require strong and steady bandwidth. What type of wireless hardware should I look into, and are there any precautions I should be aware of? Kelly, Madison CT.

Alienware: Currently, a wireless network based on MIMO wireless technology will give you reliable connectivity and 'wired quality' bandwidth throughout your home. There are many manufacturers that utilize MIMO within routers and add-in cards, which you can pick-up at your local hardware store.

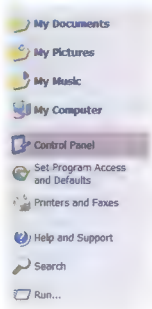
Wireless home networks are definitely convenient; however, security is still the biggest issue, especially when neighbors are in close proximity, such as in apartment complexes. To be as safe as possible and to make sure someone isn't 'stealing' your bandwidth, make sure to password protect your wireless network. This will keep any unwanted eyes from peering into your network.

Q. I'd like to know the best way to install new drivers. Let's say video drivers like Catalyst or Forceware. Some people recommend these really intricate steps that use third party apps. What's the fastest method to upgrade to new drivers? Rob, Miami FL.

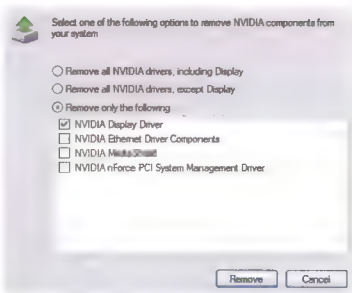
Alienware: Here's a quick and easy way to install new drivers:

First, obtain a copy of the new driver you want to install. You should be able to download the latest drivers from your video card manufacturer's website. *Hint: Save the file to your desktop so you can easily find it later.*

Second, uninstall the drivers that are currently on your system. The drivers can be uninstalled by utilizing the Add/Remove Programs found in the Control Panel *(Click Start button, click Control Panel, double click Add/Remove Programs).*

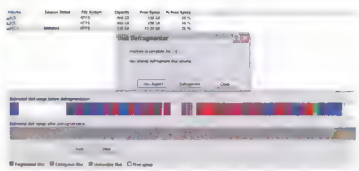


Finally, open the driver installation file that you obtained from your video card manufacturer (now on your desktop). Follow the instructions on the screen and you should be good to go.


Select one of the following options to remove NVIDIA components from your system
Remove all NVIDIA drivers, including Display
Remove all NVIDIA drivers, except Display
Remove only the following
NVIDIA Display Driver
NVIDIA Ethernet Driver Components
NVIDIA nForce PCI System Management Driver
Remove
Cancel

Q. How often should I defrag my hard drive? I usually know when my drive is getting fragmented because it starts to grind more than usual. Lately I defrag after every big game install (not demos) and it seems to help with performance. What is considered too little or too much defragging? Lemar, San Jose CA.

Alienware: Think of the data on your hard drive as papers scattered on a desk. To find something, you need to go through the pile each time; however, if you take the time to organize the pile, the correct document will be easier to find. Basically, defragging your hard drive organizes the data, making it easier and faster to access your files.



It is recommended to defrag your hard drive if it is more than 10% fragmented. Since fragmentation does happen more quickly when installing/uninstalling large applications like games, you may want to check the fragmentation level after installation. *Hint: Defragmentation can take a while, especially the first time, so you may want to defrag when you are not going to use your system.*

E3 SHOWCASE

At E3 2006, Alienware introduced two new ultra-powerful mobile systems loaded with dual NVIDIA GeForce Go 7900 GPUs: the 17" Aurora m9700 and the 19" Aurora mALX. As Alienware's most powerful desktop replacements to date, the Aurora m9700 and Aurora mALX provide up to twice the graphics performance of single-GPU mobile systems for a blistering gaming experience, and are the first mobile systems to feature groundbreaking Airgo MIMO wireless technology for faster, more reliable Wi-Fi performance.

SPECIAL EDITION SUPERMAN SYSTEM

Alienware has also announced the release of a limited-edition Superman desktop and notebook featuring stunning chassis designs of the Man of Steel. Each system showcases exclusive artwork designed by a DC Comics artist, individually-numbered, and comes with a certificate of authenticity and special Superman desktop skin.

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The 360's Japanese Reboot

Microsoft Japan digs in for round two

"This is what the Xbox360 needs, and as revealed by numerous, encouraging recent announcements, this is what it's getting."

The Xbox360 has sold approximately 150,000 units in Japan. In America, it has sold well over a million. Yes folks, that's quite a disparity, and Microsoft is none too happy about it. What happened to "we'll sell as many systems in a single month as the original Xbox did during its entire Japanese run"? What happened to "the reign of the empire is over" (never mind the fact that the author of that statement, former Japanese Xbox czar Yoshihiro Maruyama, has since been "reassigned")?

One is tempted to ask: Japan and X -- why zzz's? I don't think it's as simple as a Japanese market unwilling to accept foreign products. Every computer in Japan runs Windows. The iPod sells better in Japan than it does in any other country in the world. Japan is the biggest export market on Earth for Hollywood motion pictures. No, the problem is not Japan spurning the foreign barbarian's product, it's the games. The Japanese market is supported by "light users", people who buy only a few games a year, and then almost always games in major series and/or by well-known creators. This is what the Xbox360 needs, and as revealed by numerous, encouraging recent announcements, this is what it's getting. It can't be argued that Japanese developer support for the new 'Box is leaps and bounds beyond the first (and is turning out to be even more impressive than initially thought last year). On the following pages we'll examine some of the most promising home-grown titles that have been announced for release.

But will these be enough? There are plenty of exciting gamenuggets here, to be sure, but what's missing is that elusive major series. The 360 is getting Resident Evil 5 and Sonic, but then again, so is the PS3. Will these games be enough to "reboot" the system in Japan, as is the hope? Does Microsoft have more tricks hidden up its sleeves and/or money coffers? Something tells me they do, and we'll find out at E3, where many of these games are likely to be announced for a US release.

Nick Des Barres

Blue Dragon

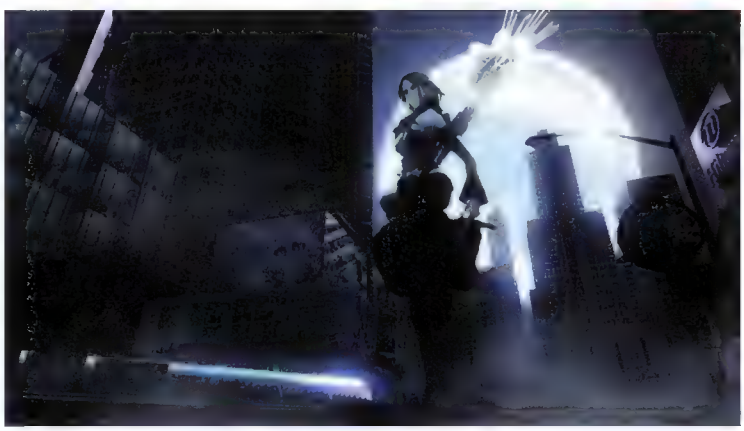
Biggie #1, Microsoft's Dragon Quest. If anything can save the system in Japan, it's Final Fantasy creator Hironobu Sakaguchi's Blue Dragon. Too bad we know almost nothing about it, except that in terms of pure star power it's got hit written all over it: Character designs by Dragon Ball's Akira Toriyama, music by melody master Nobuo Uematsu of Final Fantasy fame, and actual development handled by Artoon, "father of Sonic" Naoto Ohshima's studio. If their work on the Blinx series is any indication, we should be in for quite the treat.

Developer: Mistwalker/Artoon
Publisher: Microsoft
Release date: 2006 (Japan)

Mobile Suit Gundam

Perhaps the fifth-most important original Japanese Xbox360 game after Sakaguchi's triple threat and tri-Ace's RPG (see below), Mobile Suit Gundam is significant because Bandai Namco is letting their top franchise appear on the Xbox360...and it's even set during the Holy Grail of Gundam time periods, the One-Year War. This could indicate confidence in the 'Box, or a lot of money changing hands. Let's just hope the first-person shooting nature of the game doesn't alienate gamers in a land traditionally averse to the genre.

Developer: Dimps
Publisher: Bandai Namco
Release date: 2006 (Japan)



Culdcept Saga

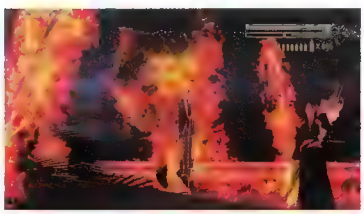
One of the Japanese 360 games that has me most excited (I spent some months playing the ridiculously addictive Dreamcast version online), Culdcept Saga is the latest and grandest entry in OmiyaSoft's long-running, Magic-inspired card game series. They promise a much richer experience this time, with a fully fleshed-out, RPG-like storyline (apparently will full English voice, recorded with the Western market in mind), full polygon graphics and the traditional luscious score by Kenji Ito.

Developer: OmiyaSoft
Publisher: Bandai Namco
Release date: Summer 2006 (Japan)

Bullet Witch

Well-regarded independent developer and go-to team for ghost programming (Both Drakengards, Resident Evil: Dead Aim, Beat Down, Yangus's Mysterious Dungeon) cavia's first major solo effort looks to be a typical Japanese free-roaming Devil May Cry-esque affair, and that's a good thing. In fact, it's exactly what the 360 needs. You play as Kate Beckinsale-in-Underworld-lookalike Alicia, a Witch who shoots, um, Bullets out of her gigantic, broom-shaped gun. Good times for all.

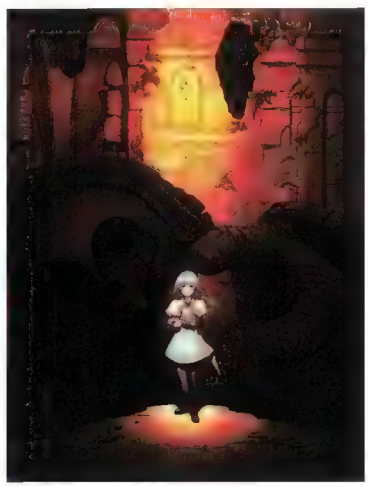
Developer: cavia *(Please note non-capitalization)*
Publisher: AQ Interactive
Release date: 7/13/06 (Japan)



Cry On

The final tine on Hironobu Sakaguchi's three-pronged fork, action-RPG-to-be Cry On will also be developed by cavia, and, astonishingly, also features a Nobuo Uematsu score. Cry On, which apparently has the theme of "tears", is even more mysterious that Blue Dragon and Lost Odyssey -- little surprise, as it's not expected any earlier than 2007.

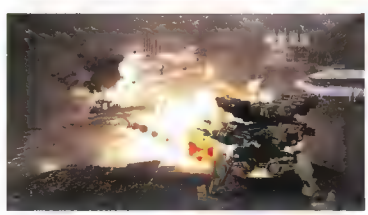
Developer: Mistwalker/cavia
Publisher: AQ Interactive
Release date: Undetermined



Chromehounds

From Software and Sega's mechtastic Chromehounds, after several months of being the most exciting-looking Japanese-exclusive Xbox360 game (since Sakaguchi's trio is still utterly intangible), is finally nearing release, and it looks better than ever. Just don't expect an Armored Core: Hounds has its fair share of explosive action, but leans toward a more strategic experience.

Developer: From Software
Publisher: Sega
Release date: 6/29/06 (Japan)



The **360's Japanese** Reboot

Zegapain XOR

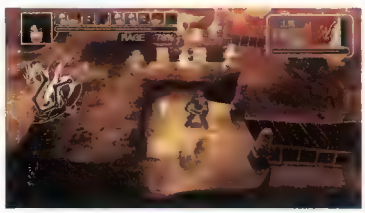
Bandai Namco's Zegapain XOR marks the third (but far from last) giant mecha action game in this article, and is based on the new anime series in Japan this season of the same name. Very few gameplay details have been revealed, but it seems safe to say one can expect a ZOE-esque experience.

Developer: Bandai
Publisher: Bandai Namco
Release date: Summer 2006

Spectral Force 3: Innocent Rage

Idea Factory, the House That Spectral Force Built, is showing surprising confidence in the 360 by gracing it with the first numbered entry in their flagship series since 1998's Spectral Force 2 on PSone. It's probably safe to expect classic, J-Simulation RPG gaming...only this time in HD!

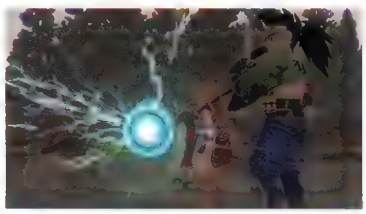
Developer: Idea Factory
Publisher: Idea Factory
Release date: 6/29/06 (Japan)



Tengai Makyo ZIRIA

Also now available in Japan, Tengai Makyo ZIRIA: Far-Off Jipang is a grounds-up remake of Oji Hiroi's legendary PC-Engine RPG...the first RPG ever on CD media, in fact. The game is as solid as ever but rather sparse, though full-screen, HD anime cutscenes make up the difference.

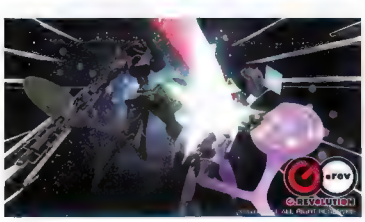
Developer: RED/Hudson
Publisher: Hudson
Release date: Available now (Japan)



Senko no Ronde Rev.X

Tiny developer G.rev (eight people!) offer up a massively enhanced port of their cult-hit arcade versus shooting (that's right, versus shooting) game Senko no Ronde ("Ronde of Rotating Light"), which originally ran on the Dreamcast-based Naomi hardware. Another perfect example of what the 360 needs: Innovative, yet accessible, original software.

Developer: G.rev
Publisher: G.rev
Release date: 7/27/06 (Japan)



Zoids Infinity EX NEO

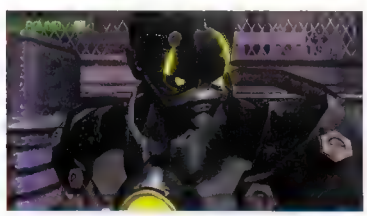
Takara Tomy and Taito's utterly decent port of their popular VirtualOn-inspired arcade mechtioner Zoids Infinity EX is already available in Japan, and though it may not have received much 360 polish is still a solid, fun experience. Customization options are prevalent and there's always a match waiting on Xbox Live!.

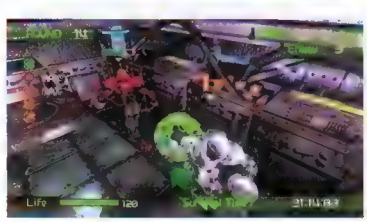
Developer: Taito
Publisher: Takara Tomy
Release date: Available now (Japan)

Bomberman Act: Zero

Whoa. Wait a second now...this is not the Bomberman I remember. The gameplay appears to be classic Bomberman, seemingly unchanged from the 1985 Famicom original, and that's a good thing. But did Hudson's cute mascot really need to get replaced by Boomers from Bubblegum Crisis? Or am I just getting old?

Developer: Hudson
Publisher: Hudson
Release date: 5/25/06 (Japan)





And...

[illegible]

Quite astonishingly, tri-Ace has announced an original, as-yet-untitled Xbox360 RPG, to be published by Microsoft. tri-Ace had previously been believed to be more or less wholly owned by Square-Enix (due to their only ever having made S-E games: Star Ocean, Valkyrie Profile and Radiata Stories), but this is clearly no longer the case. Don't expect this one until at least 2007.

Developer: tri-Ace
Publisher: Microsoft
Release date: Undetermined (Japan)

[illegible]

Yes. This is what I want; give it to me, baby. A game with the working title of "Project Sylph" from Game Arts? C'mon guys, you ain't foolin' nobody. It's Silpheed, friends, back from the dead and ready to triumph over the poor PS2 showing the shooting series made. Looks like Gung Ho's almost total buyout of Game Arts won't prevent them from making offline games after all.

Developer: Game Arts
Publisher: Square-Enix
Release date: Undetermined (Japan)

[illegible]

Not really Japanese but aimed at that market (the Magna Carta series is by Korean developer Softmax), nothing is yet known about Magna Carta 2 except that publisher Banpresto is shooting for a 2007 release, and that illustration god Hyung-Tae Kim is returning to provide character designs.

Developer: Softmax
Publisher: Banpresto
Release date: 2007 (Japan)

[illegible]

The best for last? Perhaps, friends, perhaps. Right before press time Treasure dropped a bomb in the form of an "original shooting game" announcement...and that can mean only one thing: RS3. Always planned as a trilogy, the Radiant Silvergun/Ikaruga (known in preproduction as "RS2") series will receive its final installment on Xbox360. Watch this space for more information.

Developer: Treasure
Publisher: Undetermined
Release date: Undetermined (Japan)

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Square Enix	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Square Enix	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	T

GAME REVIEW

Final Fantasy XII

The RPG is dead. Long live the RPG.

words Nick Des Barres

How does one begin to write about Final Fantasy XII? How does one attempt to encapsulate in 2,000 words 300 human beings' four years of work? The scale of FFXII is so grand, so overwhelming, so *vast*, that comparisons to other video games -- a proper review, in other words -- borders on the impossible. It is reportedly the most expensive game ever made, has been delayed for some two years, gone through innumerable core system revisions, and has lost several key staff over its development cycle. Logic would suggest a disaster. Instead, it is a triumph.

Yasumi Matsuno (for he shall forever be the author of this game, regardless of having officially stepped down from the director's chair very late in production for health reasons), whom you may remember as the father of the Ogre Battle series and director of Final Fantasy Tactics and Vagrant Story, has taken the most stagnant of genres, the most unchanging, trapped-in-time modes of gameplay, and completely exploded them. I have experienced Final Fantasy XII for 151 hours -- for that is how long it took to fully complete -- and I will tell you it is probably the best RPG I have ever played.

Will I call it the best RPG *ever*? I hesitate to make such a declaration, as I am but one man amongst the 2.5 million who have played the game, a significant percentage of whom do not share my opinion. The most common complaints leveled against it here in Japan are, "it's too hard", "the systems are too complicated", and perhaps most damningly,

"The scale of FFXII is so grand, so overwhelming, so vast, that comparisons to other video games -- a proper review, in other words -- borders on the impossible."

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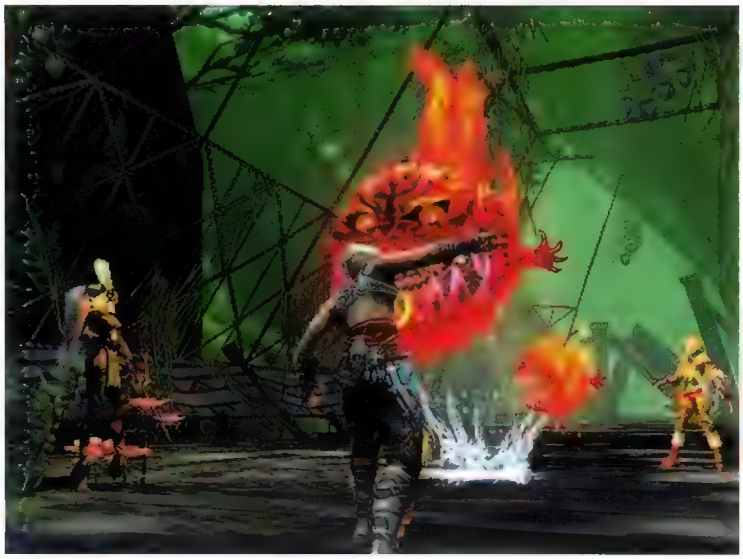


"it isn't Final Fantasy." But what *is* Final Fantasy? Has any major gaming franchise changed as much over the years as Square's crown jewel? Unlike, say, Dragon Quest, Final Fantasy is as mutable and pliant as any major franchise I can think of. Is this transition really any more radical than that between, say, VI and VII? The new, painterly visual style, spearheaded by constant Matsuno collaborator Akihiko Yoshida, is no more jarring than the segue from Yoshitaka Amano's flowing lines to Tetsuya Nomura's sharp angles. Composer Nobuo Uematsu may be gone (having only penned the ending theme, "Kiss Me Goodbye"), replaced by another frequent Matsuno associate, Hitoshi Sakimoto, but let's not forget that Uematsu only wrote a fraction of the music in FFX an XI, and none in FFX-2. Final Fantasy has very much been about change since its first sequel, with each game telling not only a new story but largely scrapping the game systems from earlier titles, even when they worked.

So I sit right with the change FFXII represents. What you should know, however, is that FFXII is the most radically *different* Final Fantasy ever made. I'm not just talking about the gameplay, though I will cover it first. (At this moment I'd like you to read the box-outs on each new system if you haven't already.) The major points: XII has a contiguous world with no overworld map, the chestnut that was banished in X. The entire game uses one engine, much like FFXI. Areas are massive, entirely free-roaming, liberated from the miniature film set-like dioramas of X and X-2. You have complete control of the camera. Again as in XI, there are no random encounters. Enemies simply inhabit the areas; you walk up, you fight, bang-bang-bang, it's over in seconds. No loading. No screen transitions. The majority of battles will require no input from the user save directing your character with the left stick. I'll repeat. The majority of battles -- general non-boss battles -- will require no input. An RPG that plays itself? The final transition for the series from game to noninteractive movie (as many have claimed all FFs since VII essentially are)? No. Not by a long shot.

In FFXII, battles are fought long before they actually occur, in the Gambit setup menu. They are essentially script sequences for your characters to follow, simple if/than choices that you program in advance. Think of yourself as a military strategist, anticipating the challenges ahead and planning accordingly. This is not to suggest, of course, that you relinquish control when the battles actually begin. You are in complete control at all times, and can direct any character to do whatever you wish, whenever you like. But what are the vast majority of choices made during RPG battles? Attack and healing, with various status ailment cures peppered here and there throughout. If you set up your Gambits right (and keep in mind they are 100% user-created – the game still requires as much *thinking* as any FF ever has), they simply serve the elegant purpose of *automating* battles. How often does one select "Attack" or cast Cure during the course an FF? Thousands of times. That tedium has now been eliminated. One feels like a hand-weaver in ancient times suddenly being gifted with a loom. In short, Gambits eliminate the humdrum repetition and leave only the most exciting, fulfilling parts of J-RPG battle: The unusual choices, those out-of-left-field strategies you use to undermine boss AI. Unless you rejigger your Gambits for every boss encounter, you'll still be making these in real-time. Despite pre-release fears, the battles in FFXII have not been dumbed down in any way. They are simply now crispy, tight, fast-moving and stress-free.

It's really quite a brilliant system, and thankfully Square puts it to great use throughout this *very* lengthy game. FFXII is inarguably the longest Final Fantasy ever (most players should beat it in 80-100 hours, though

"It's really quite a brilliant system, and thankfully Square puts it to great use throughout this very lengthy game."

The Gambit System

FFXII eschews the tedium of "attack, attack, attack" with the entirely user-programmable Gambit System. Although you are in control at all times and can override a Gambit-made decision whenever you wish, the system effectively banishes RPG battle tedium with a simple, if/than structure: Poisoned? Cast Poisona. Party member's HP below 50%? Cast Cure. Is there an enemy weak to ice? Cast Blizzard. Boss encounters still generally require manual input, but if you program your Gambits right, 90% of battles will transpire fuss-free.

The License Board

Somewhat similar to FFX's Sphere Board System but with far more freedom (all characters have an identical board), players use License Points accrued from battle to purchase Licenses to use equipment, magic, skills, enhancements and stat boosts. Its open-ended nature allows one to effectively groom any character into whatever they desire: You want to make man's man Basch a willowy magic user? Erstwhile Queen of Dalmasca Ashe a conniving thief? It's your choice.

The Clan System

Essentially taking the place of the traditional "main mini-game" (Triple Triad, Blitzball) of recent Final Fantasies, the Clan System represents FFXII's largest optional gameplay element. At any time you can check message boards in pubs for quests completely unrelated to the main storyline, somewhat resembling an MMORPG. All take the form of boss encounters, though many expand into lengthy sub-missions that allow access to new areas, weapons, items and summons.

people who want to do *everything* can expect it to take as many as 200) with a good 40% or so being totally optional. Unlike virtually every previous game in the series, this optional content is peppered liberally throughout the main quest, and does not come all in one chunk at the end, after the traditional Acquiring of the Airship. As an example, fully half of all the summon spells in the game are optional quests and cannot be learned during the main story. This is, of course, only the tip of the iceberg -- I don't exaggerate when I say nearly half of FFXII's content is unrelated to the main plot. You'll find entirely optional dungeons, minigames, subplots, and dozens of "rare monsters", another idea borrowed from FFXI and its "NMs". There's even a final Super Boss that can take as many as ten hours to defeat. That's *ten hours* of constant battle. It's so long, in fact, that you can save during it! The developers have gone on record as saying XII's unusually long development period gave them the luxury of adding subquests right up until the game was mastered, and that such a thing is unlikely to ever happen again...so savor it while you can.

I don't want to address the core of Final Fantasy XII, its story, too directly, as the vast majority of people reading this won't be playing the game for several months yet. What I will say is that it is, in its way, just as revolutionary as the new game systems. In FFXII, you don't save the world. There is no threat to life itself, and should you lose the planet will not be destroyed. In fact, life would continue on pretty much as normal. FFXII is a human drama, the tale of a small country known as Dalmasca caught between the expansion of two power-hungry empires. Its ostensible villain, a man who seeks to conquer the world, is not *necessarily* evil...for what would really be so bad about a unified government? You play as Vaan, a street urchin from Dalmasca who serves as a sort of cipher -- not a protagonist so much as an observer, who exists so that we may experience the story through his eyes. FFXII is solidly about its heroine Ashe, the former Princess of Dalmasca before it was annexed, its King killed, its monarchy abolished, by the giant and power-mad Archadean Empire. Her goal is simple: Freedom for her country. Though a hint of supernatural influence eventually finds it way into the plot, the story's small scale and emphasis on people rather than whiz-bang all-hell-breaks-loose scenarios of Final Fantasies past has drawn more than a few complaints. Instead, I hail it as a breath of fresh air, a truly refreshing re-examination of what a Final Fantasy can be. You see, it's a *plausible* Final Fantasy. The events that transpire, and the world that these characters inhabit, Ivalice, feels real, as if one were bearing witness to history.

"What is truly shocking, however, is the volume of this beauty. In terms of sheer mileage this game is several orders of magnitude larger than X or X-2..."

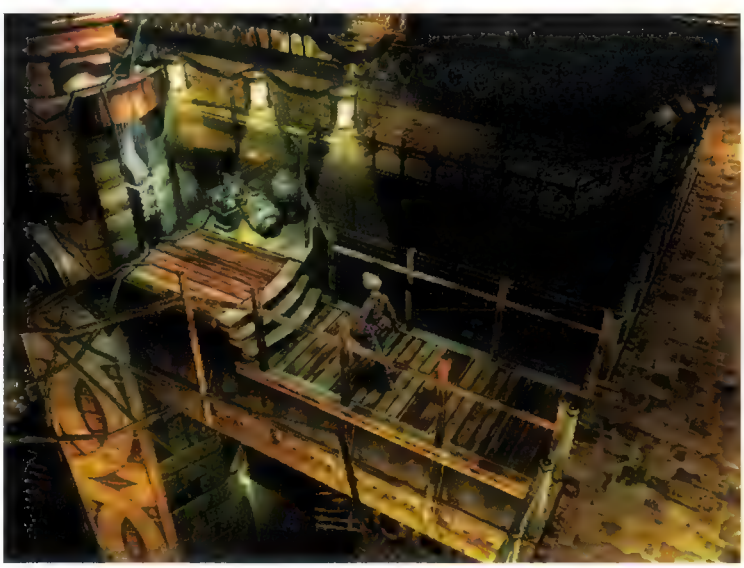
But wait now, you may be thinking, didn't this guy just talk about how grand and overwhelming FFXII was in his opening paragraph? How can a Final Fantasy without a *crisis of Biblical proportions* be sweeping, be epic? The answer is in the presentation. All Final Fantasies are meant to reflect the pinnacle of technology at the time they are released, and this game is no exception, nor did I expect it to be. And yet, it has completely shattered those expectations, emerging as undeniably the most gorgeous game ever seen on PlayStation 2. What is truly shocking, however, is the *volume* of this beauty. In terms of sheer mileage this game is several orders of magnitude larger than X or X-2, and the flurry, the *barrage*, of intricate, meticulously-crafted, spectacularly art-designed new areas never stops, right up to the end of the game. Just when you think there can't possibly be any more, that the story must be winding up, areas are pulled seemingly from nowhere to delight and entertain. A large part of the considerable pleasure I derived from FFXII came from simply ogling the scenery, wondering at tufts of grass between cobblestones, rivulets of water cascading through aqueducts, steam lightly dancing from skewers of meat in a bazaar, shafts of light piercing holes in the awnings overhead. Everything you see is most certainly fantastical, but as with the story, something about it rings true. One can compare it, perhaps, to the very finest of Hollywood production design. If you allow yourself, on a subconscious level you can fool yourself: Ivalice is real.

A couple weeks ago Play's own Brady Fiechter asked me, "How's FFXII treating you?" The only possible answer was: FFXII is treating me like a slave. Once you pick this game up, you will not stop until you have reached its conclusion. During the 8- and 16-bit eras, the last Final Fantasy on a system was its best: III and VI. Though the final 32-bit FF, IX, may have failed to live up to that tradition, this remarkable game has rekindled it. Yes, it is the best PlayStation 2 Final Fantasy. This is not to say, of course, that it is without its flaws. One can point to things such as a shop system that refuses to inform the user of anything but the base stats for equipment on sale, fairly useless summon spells, an unfortunate under-use of the myriad of new races introduced, no intuitive way to switch between short- and long-ranged weapons, and an ineffectual hero (though I would argue this is by design). All are trifles when weighed against the total, sum experience this extraordinary work of interactive art offers. Please, play Final Fantasy XII. You might just find it overriding your life, allowing you for a few magical weeks to live in another world. And I ask you, friends, isn't that exactly what RPGs are supposed to do?

Final Fantasy XII — score: **10**

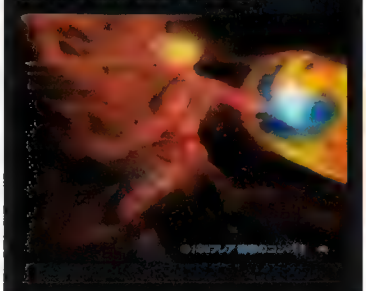
\+ Square's reimagining of the traditional RPG is right on so many levels one doesn't know where to begin

\- Some may balk at the radical new battle system and decidedly un-Final Fantasy storyline



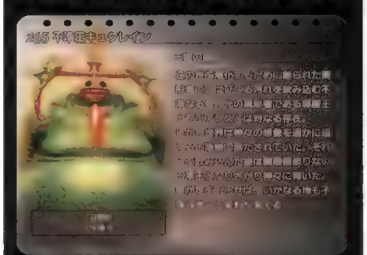
Myst Knacks

Taking the place of Limit Breaks from previous Final Fantasies, Myst Knacks ("Myst" is the pervading magical energy that saturates everything in the world of Ivalice -- think the Force in Star Wars) are the only character-specific skills in FFXII. Requiring one "Myst Cartridge" -- basically partitions in your MP gauge that are also used for summon magic -- they can be chained à la FFXI Weapon Skills for massive pyrotechnic effects and insane damage.



The Hunt Catalogue

Every enemy you defeat gets an entry in the Hunt Catalogue, an always-accessible bestiary that contains their profile (often right down to their evolutionary history, hibernation, and migration patterns) and image. But that is only the beginning: By defeating a certain number of each enemy, textual information becomes available that ranges from arcane histories of the world of Ivalice, to the ramblings of insane priests, to the sagas of epic poets, greatly expanding on Yasumi Matsuno's intricately-constructed mythos.



Pirates' Secret Hideout

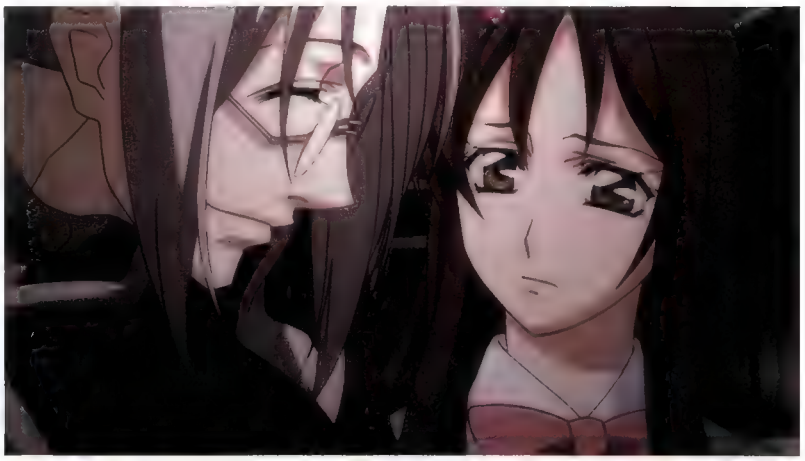
By meeting various quotas (running a gamut as innocuous as Stealing successfully 50 times to collecting complete Hunt Catalogue data on every enemy in the game), cute Final Fantasy Tactics-style superdeformed versions of FFXII characters, summons and major enemies appear in your Pirates' Secret Hideout screen. Every single character you see here represents a single "achievement", to use Xbox parlance, and spread out over the course of a 100+ hour game, there are quite a lot.

Trinity Blood

House of the Unholy

words Dave Halverson

Released by	FUNimation	**Running Time**	100 minutes
Rating	13 and up	**Available**	September



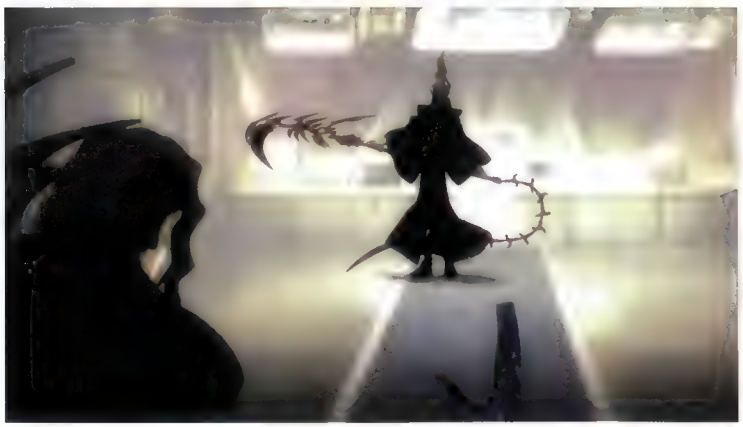
Abel is barely recognizeable when angered (see above).

I've missed Hellsing. Whenever you can get vampires and organized religion on opposing sides the result is usually pure guilty pleasure...and I'm as pleased as plasma punch. Live-action could never deliver a holy war as extravagant as this—the latest in a growing string of anime that continues to raise the bar. Beyond the vampires vs. sect, *Hellsing* parallels *Trinity Blood*'s protagonist Abel Nightroad who, like Alucard, exterminates his own kind for the human cause, but elsewhere *Trinity Blood* more than stands on its own. In a far off future where civilization is but a fading memory, mankind is fighting for its existence against a very organized vampire insurgence, seething with hatred and complete disregard for human life. Everyone is on the menu and no innocent is spared. Early on, the hijacking of a massive Vatican airship comes off without a hitch (initially) but the vampire terrorist drains every last passenger anyway, even though they've devised alternative ways to feed.

> "Nightroad is the spark that ignites the series' unique tone."

Fighting the vampires, under the command of the Vatican's Secretary of State Catherine Sforza, the Ax organization's arsenal consists of Abel Nightroad and Tres Iqus, a cybernetic soldier with dual pistols and an utter lack of emotion circuits. Nightroad is the spark that ignites the series' unique tone. His MO is ultra-Jekyll-and-Hyde, outwardly bumbling and almost idiotic, until such a time when violence is called for causing a transformation that turns him into the personification of evil. Events transpire rapidly in Volume 1, introducing new characters—a powerful young witch and a sister from the human resistance play key roles ripe for development over the long haul—and visually, even more so than usual for Gonzo, *Trinity Blood* literally glistens. The character designs are extravagant, especially within the Vatican, and the detail throughout is impeccable for a series bred for TV. There is also an intelligently devised political undercurrent at work that keeps TB from delving too deep into its predecessors' wake, as well as a hint of sci-fi as we're introduced to a satellite launched into orbit to provide electricity. Of course the vampires want it to incinerate the Vatican. Nothing beats a scheming pack of hell spawn. Maybe this time they'll be victorious. It's about time they won one. **play**

One of Trinity's many inspired character designs.



Trinity Blood
Volume 1

score 9.5

\+ High production values, beautiful CGI touches, great characters and inspired design.

\- The Pontiff is a punk.

DEVELOPED BY CHRIS COLUMBUS, PRODUCER AND DIRECTOR OF THE "HARRY POTTER" SERIES

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Released by	Bandai Entertainment	**Running Time**	125 minutes
Rating	13 and up	**Available**	April

Eureka Seven
エウレカセブン

words **Dave Halverson**

Let's face it, anime is anything but full of surprises. Studios pretty much stick to reprising and refining what they know fans want over attempting to reinvent themselves, more than likely because doing so usually results in at best cult status (see *Gilgamesh*, *Elfen Lied*, *Gantz*, *EDF Daichis* etc.). That reality comes to a screeching halt with Eureka Seven, a show with mega-hit written all over it that uses surfing—yes surfing—as its catalyst…only these waves are in the sky. Okay, so elsewhere there's a bunch of mecha flying around (check that—surfing around) trying to shoot each other down; a love story or two, political intrigue, family ties, and a hard-ass general that wants to bring the whole thing crashing down…but still Eureka Seven comes off Downy-fresh thanks in no small part to Renton, the 14-year-old dreamer who's living in the shadow of his dad and his dream. Renton goes from utterly convinced everything sucks (the city where he lives, his school, being 14…) except for surfing the currents, to a boy hero in love within the span of an episode-and-a-half. That big moment that's always alluded to and finally achieved in the last episode—we get like three by volume's end: Renton meets his hero, realizes his potential and falls in love by the time the V1 credits roll. Things go from sucking to not sucking in the blink of an eye when the Nervash Type-Zero LFO (giant robot) practically lands on his head followed by a tirade of ensuing revelations. But like any 14-year-old worth his salt, Renton has only one thing on his mind—the Nervash's beautiful young pilot, Eureka. I love everything about Eureka Seven but nothing so much as the rapidly evolving script rife with surfing innuendo and some of the most sparkling character designs since *Eva*. All I want now is more. **play**

> "I love everything about Eureka Seven but nothing so much as the rapidly evolving script…"

Backside aerial action, mecha style!

Eureka Seven
Volume 1

9.5

+	Dude, it's like a total surfing analogy only on flying ref-boards with mechs bro, and hot chicks, and hip-pies—but it's this hot anime!
–	Pft…queue the crickets. This one's got it all.

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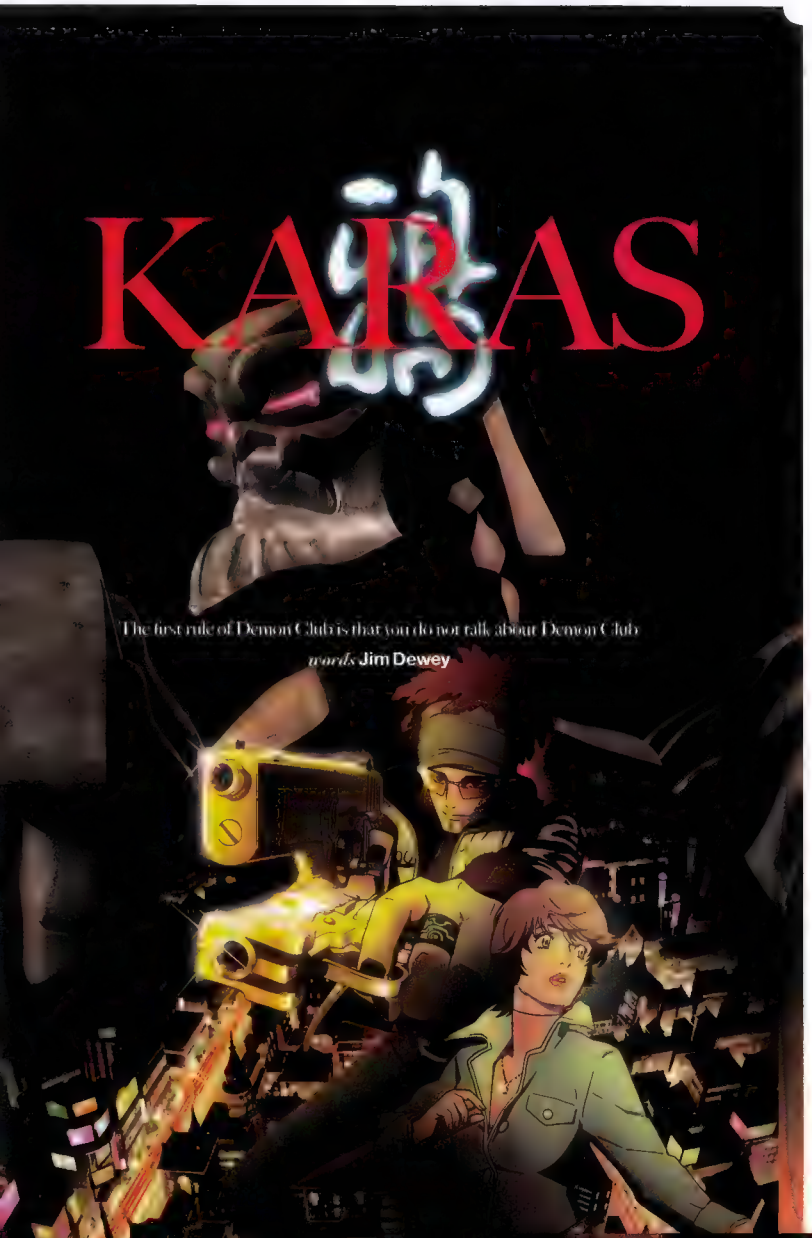
Released by	Manga Video	Running Time	80 minutes
Rating	Unrated	Available	Now

KARAS

The first rule of Demon Club is that you do not talk about Demon Club

words Jim Dewey



orget secret government cover-ups-- there's been one for centuries put upon the people of Japan by the demon world, carefully picking off the population in small doses by draining them of their bodily fluids.

And in all this time, there was one warrior who stood to remove them from their vampiric habits who is called Karas. Human by default, Otoha has been brought to existence three years after the defeat of the last one by the original named Eko, who grew embittered on mankind's lack of respect for themselves during his duty as their hidden protector; he's now given these enemies new abilities to blend in with society and metallic bodies to do their evil deeds. All the while as Karas's blade battles on, he crosses paths with two detectives assigned to investigate these bizarre deaths, naïve cowboy-hat wearing Narumi and Minoru, his wild-eyed, conspiracy-theorist partner. To top it all off, there is yet another player in Nue, a wanderer who isn't quite human himself, and packs a wicked shot in addition to his amazing acrobatics. But why are the attacks intensifying? Why is a witness left alive after each attack? And why can't Otoha remember anything from his past? This is only chapter one after all...

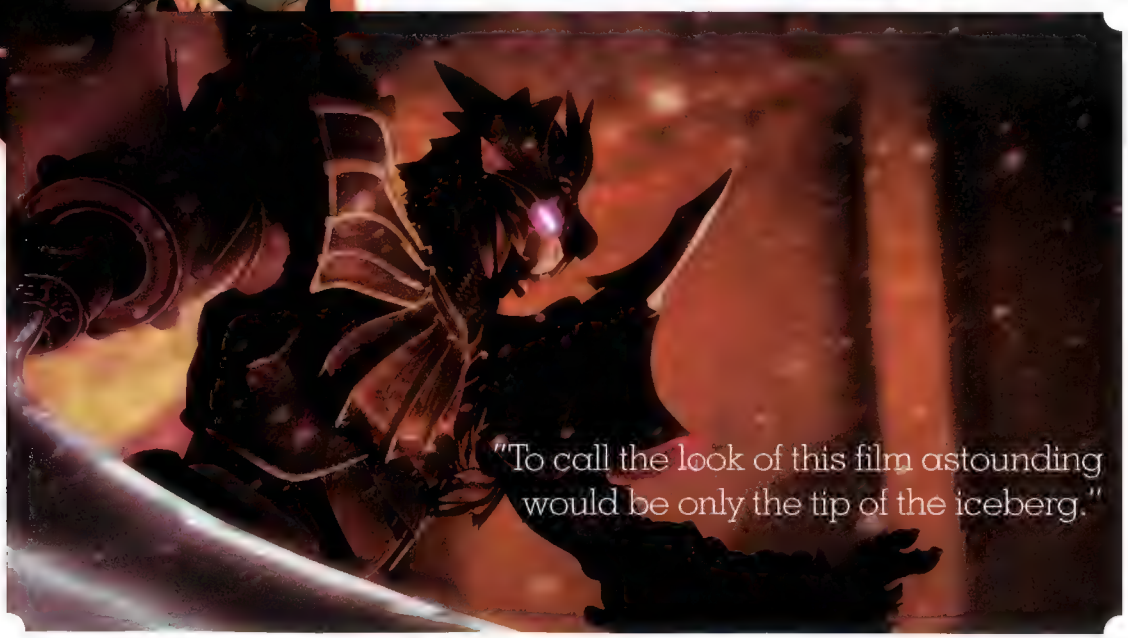
To call the look of this film astounding would be only the tip of the iceberg-- between the aerial battles and screamingly fast swordplay, you can't help but pause the film from time to time to catch the intricate details of the city, the character's armor, his transformations into it, and the look of his highly mechanized enemies. Nearly every frame of the battles could be framed on a wall-- they look that good.

As for the story, being this is the first of two chapters, more questions than answers are given (save for one major revelation) and the story seems to almost get ahead of itself at times, feeling as if parts of scenes have been taken out for pacing-- rushing ahead to the good parts, as it were. Karas somewhat random transformations into jets and cars comes off a bit odd, but seeing as how the story is already over the top, a shrug of acceptance lets this off the hook. Wild card Nue proves even more colorful than the main protagonist, and it's not just because of his snazzy hipster clothes and flashy gunplay. The detectives take a fresh spin on an *X-Files* theme, and ground the story in the human element, never letting the fantasy run away with all the narrative. All in all for setting up part 2, *Karas: the Prophecy,* as the staging area for the conclusion, solidly stands its ground against an already epic war of spirits. **play**

KARAS
Volume 1: The Prophecy

SCORE **9.5**

+	CG and traditional animation work in a perfect marriage, both of which are spared no expense.
-	Hero Otoha is a bit too stoic and muted for his own good; Eko doesn't dirty his hands enough.



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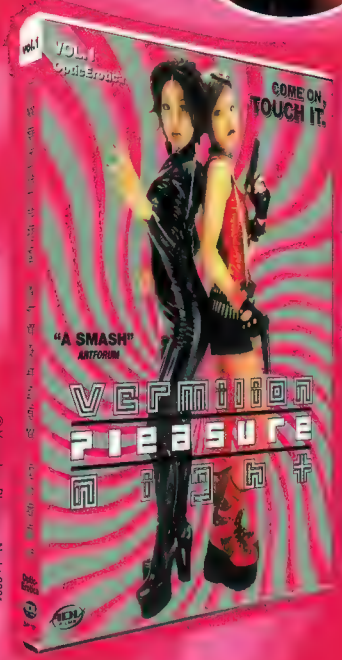

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Released by	FUNimation	Running Time	100 minutes
Rating	M	Available	July

Speed Grapher

Smile for the camera...

words Dave Halverson

Saiga snaps the picture that will save his life.

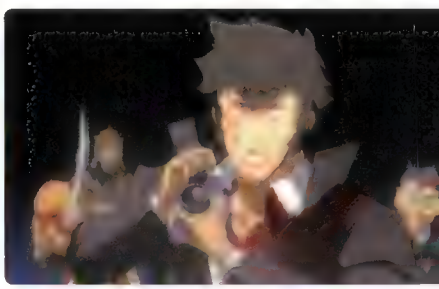
There's a reason why anime is such an addiction for the hundreds-of-thousands of fans worldwide that have made it a part of their daily doctrine, and moreover why that passion only intensifies over time. It's because year after year, somehow, anime gets exponentially better. As this year's new series begin to roll in I find myself astounded at every turn, and at the same time feeling all the more sad for the millions of people who haven't discovered it. Perhaps Speed Grapher will convert a few more lost souls from the bastions of mindless entertainment.

The first episode of Speed Grapher focuses on Saiga, a war photographer who's seen such human atrocities that life as photographer in the big city (a neo-Tokyo ruled by the upper-class where the poor are regarded as little more than human refuse) has rendered him numb, if not fearless. A puppet on a string abetting a corrupt female police officer (who gets off on popping perps like piñatas) who makes sure he's first on the scene in exchange for sexual favors, his life is pretty much in a downward spiral. All of that changes however, when a massacre of public officials opposed to a drug reform bill sends him into the underbelly of Tokyo high-society to infiltrate a secret club run by the omnipotent Tennouzu Corporation. In a scene that had to be

"Perhaps Speed Grapher will convert a few more lost souls from the bastions of mindless entertainment."

inspired by the masquerade/orgy from Eyes Wide Shut, the curtain closes on the maiden episode with the kiss of death on his lips and two swords slicing through his body.

...Episode 2 introduces a parallel storyline that culminates with the aftermath of Saiga's apparent demise, but of course, he's not dead—in fact, far from it. The kiss from the Goddess, Kagura, who also happens to be the daughter of the Kagura Corps President—an abusive mother with limitless political power—has awakened his deepest desire, which manifests itself by rendering his shutter button a lethal concussion device. As a "Euphoric", when the need arises, his right eye mutates and his snapshots become an obliterating force. If only she hadn't kissed so many before him things might be alright, however, quite to the contrary he's not the only mutant in town, and the first assassin gives new meaning to the word flexible.



Kagura needs saving—Saiga needs to feel again, and Speed Grapher is nothing short of a work of art. The tone at work (Beethoven's Fifth is always welcome) along with the adult themes and exquisite presentation make this quite possibly the best M-rated anime series I've had the pleasure of indulging in. **play**

Speed Grapher
Volume 1

score 9.0

+	Dark Kubrikian undertones, beautiful presentation and production values. Wholly unique.
–	It's a hard M... not a negative but...

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Released by	Geneon Entertainment	Running Time	100 minutes
Rating	13 and up	Available	May

GUN SWORD

The quick and not so dead

At the bottom of the universe, on the planet Endless Illusion, Gun Sword is born. Imagine the razor-sharp edginess of *Cowboy BeBop* and *Samurai Champloo* combined with the post-apocalyptic feel of *Fist of North Star*, the demonology of *Vampire Hunter D*, and the neo-Old West texture of *TriGun*... That's *Gun Sword*.

I know—hard to believe. What have we done to receive such an animated blessing this year? Is there not a new series among us that doesn't glisten in its own special way? The moment you see Gun Sword's Vaughn (of the dawn) in action you're likely to blow a happiness gasket. He's everything Spike, D, and Beyond the Grave are rolled into one, only his weapon of choice is a liquid-metal sword and he can summon a mech (or "Armor") from a satellite floating in outer space. He's reluctant, crass, forgetful, and in every way odd as an individual but somehow he always ends up doing the right thing. He picks up a sidekick—the feisty young Wendy—when he stumbles on three thugs from the local soul-crushing Lucky gang murdering and robbing a funeral party. Wendy takes one to the chest but luckily the pet turtle around her neck takes the bullet. Vaughn cleans things up and it's off to what's left of civilization. Wendy is searching for her kidnapped brother, and Vaughn is looking for a man with a claw... It doesn't take long to realize two things: Vaughn is undead and Geneon have another breakthrough series on their hands. Next we meet Carmen 99, freelance information broker and spiritual successor to Jill Valentine and

in between, everything is ultra-stylized and impeccably produced. This is an absolutely breathtaking show in every respect. As for the episodes themselves, well, prepare to be thoroughly entertained. If the freakiest gambler in the universe doesn't get you, the lethal facial hair will surely do the trick.

Gun Sword
Volume 1

score 9.5

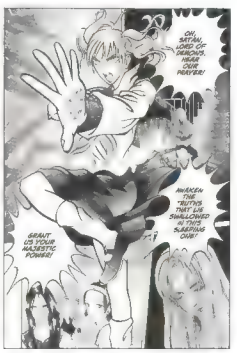
+	A combination of every great series of the last decade. Outstanding character design, nicely understated humor and u tra-compelling characters
–	I give up

"...Geneon have another breakthrough series on their hands."

Reiko the Zombie Shop

Queen of the Zombies

Publisher	Dark Horse Manga	Genre	Horror/Action	Volume	1-2
Story	Rei Mikamoto	Art	Rei Mikamoto	Rating	Mature



Reiko has the uncanny ability to raise the dead...not resurrect, but to reanimate long enough for the zombie to reveal their killer or means of demise. If the victim died of natural causes all is well and he or she may rest in peace, however, more often than not Reiko is called in under dire circumstances. If the victim was murdered, or worse if the killer is present, they go berserk, calling up all of the powers of death to seek their vengeance. Take the case of 15-year-old Marie, rotting in her room as her mother looks on bewildered why her little girl would commit suicide. Once awakened all is revealed. Turns out daddy dearest was doing the unthinkable on a regular basis. Now he's been ripped in two. Volume one pushes you to the brink of insanity and then drops a cliffhanger that'll leave you speechless. **DH**

Read it if... You pine for the return of quality horror, and have the stomach to match.

"If the victim was murdered, or worse if the killer is present, they go berserk, calling up all of the powers of death..."

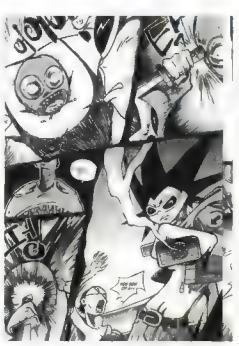
Death Jam

Hell bent for rhythm

Publisher	TokyoPop	Genre	Action
Volume	1	Rating	Older Teen 16+
Story	Jeon Sang Young	Art	Jeon Sang Young

Death Jam practically chisels out its own genre. After a brief Def Jam that pretty much sums up life on the futuristic streets of Soul City, fasten your seat belts and prepare yourself for what can only be described as living manga. Death Jam follows the beat of its own pulsating drum about a man for hire, Muchaca Smooth, and "The Movement" to which he belongs: a hip hop faction circa the end of a 20th-century gone mad. Mass hallucinations are killing gamers by the dozen but there's a worse threat in town stirring up the already rancid pot: Ssowori Rama. After a week with a PI firm, he killed two men, quit, and now he's on the loose, unregistered and out for a blood quest for "natural rhythm." **DH**

Read it if... You like your action and violence served at top speed.



Plant dagger in head and ask questions later.

SHI

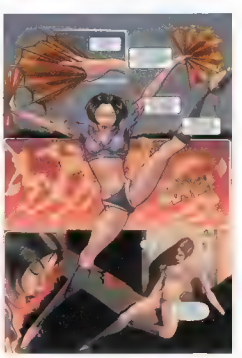
Kabuki Death Theater

Publisher	Dark Horse Books	Genre	Action/Drama
Volume	Graphic Novel	Rating	NA
Story	Billy Tucci	Art	Billy Tucci

Seldom have I seen such beauty captured in print. A collection of the four Dark Horse comics; on top of its exquisite design SHI also tells an extraordinary story of an epic war between monk sects that plays out before a live audience on a Kabuki theatre stage that's on the wrong side of the tracks for Yoshitora Ishikawa, the head of the Kyoto sohei. Leading the remnants of her sect in a performance of the classic Yoshitune Sembonzakura, in Nara, the heart of the enemy's city, not only must she overcome the venom of her enemy—the insulted leader of the Narran sohei, Lady Kaoyo—but also the Yakuza who want them both erased. SHI reads like a superb screenplay and is visually nothing short of stunning.
The amalgam of the spiritual and contemporary sides of the war create a canvas that no matter how much blood is spattered never falls short of pure elegance. **DH**

Read it if... You like mystical, theatrical, and/or criminal elements elegantly portrayed.

Epic graphic novel quote Shakespeare.



anime essentials

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Exodus Guilty

read this

Anima

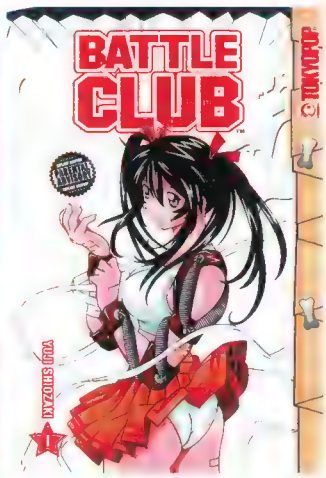
Publisher: TokyoPop | **Volume:** 1 | **Rating:** 13+

Anima are humans merged with beasts that possess animal-like abilities; a condition (or gift depending on your vantage point) that has forced them into obscurity. Cooro the crow boy's journey begins when he helps a fellow anima escape the circus and the quest for acceptance begins.

Boys of Summer

Publisher: TokyoPop | **Volume:** 1 | **Rating:** 16+

This collaboration between Chuck Austen (X-Men, King of the Hill) and Japanese artist Hiroki Otsuka marks the only time baseball has entertained me outside of a Neo Geo game or feature film. Of course it could have something to do with the coed dormitory full of hot babes.



Battle Club

Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Rating:** 18+

The creator of Battle Vixens is at it again only this time he's crossed the line from OT (older teen) to an M (mature). God bless him. First rule of Battle Club.... everybody gets flashed in Battle Club. Screw the WWE—this is wrestling.

from the vault

Spriggan Special Edition

Publisher: ADV Films | **Rating:** R

If you've never seen Spriggan, it is absolute requisite anime. The 90-minute movie features otherworldly animation and a story that blends hardcore military ops and pious revelations with science-fiction and non-stop edge-of-your-sofa action.

Patlabor 2-Disc DVD Box Set

Bandai Visual/Honneamise is giving away two Patlabor the Movie Limited Edition Box Sets. Along with Mamoru Oshii's pre-Ghost in the Shell Limited Edition epic, you get storyboards, movie archives, a making-of, and the all-5.1 English version track. . . .Thing weighs like 3 pounds.

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funimation entertainment

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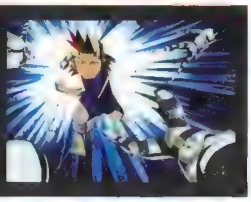
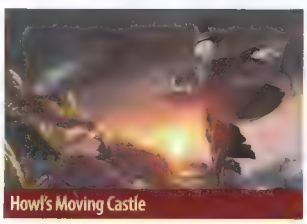
Viewtiful Joe
geneon entertainment

Joe must chow down on cheese burgers and fight savage creeps to save his beloved Sylvia!



	Virgin Megastore Top Ten
01	**Howl's Moving Castle** buena vista home entertainment
02	**Desert Punk** funimation entertainment
03	**Samurai 7** funimation entertainment
04	**Viewtiful Joe** geneon entertainment
05	**Full Metal Alchemist** funimation entertainment
06	**Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig** manga/bandai ent.
07	**Samurai Champloo** geneon entertainment
08	**Macross** adv films
09	**Godannar** adv films
10	**Gilgamesh** adv films


Howl's Moving Castle

Desert Punk

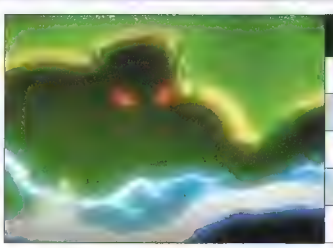
	Play Magazine Top Ten
01	**Eureka Seven** bandai entertainment
02	**Karas** manga entertainment
03	**Gun Sword** geneon entertainment
04	**Trinity Blood** funimation entertainment
05	**Naruto** viz media
06	**Speed Grapher** funimation entertainment
07	**Desert Punk** funimation entertainment
08	**Lupin the 3rd: Missed by a Dollar** funimation ent.
09	**Gakutsuou** geneon entertainment
10	**Animation Runner Kuromi 2** central park media

Eureka Seven

Karas

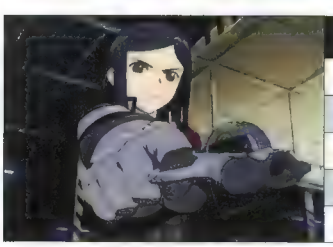
Play Editor and Reader Picks

	Dave Halverson
01	**Eureka Seven** bandai entertainment
02	**Gun Sword** geneon entertainment
03	**Karas** manga entertainment
04	**Trinity Blood** funimation entertainment
05	**Speed Grapher** funimation entertainment

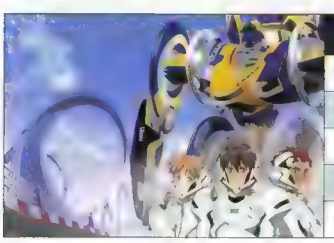


	Jim Dewey
01	**Karas** manga entertainment
02	**Animation Runner Kuromi 2** central park media
03	**Gakutsuou** geneon entertainment
04	**Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig** manga/bandai ent.
05	**Hakugei: The Legend of Moby Dick** adv films

	Eric Patterson
01	**My Neighbor Totoro** buena vista home entertainment
02	**Naruto** viz media
03	**Maison Ikkoku** viz media
04	**Diamond Daydreams** adv films
05	**Lupin the 3rd: Missed by a Dollar** funimation ent.



	Nelson Lui
01	**My-HiME** bandai entertainment
02	**Animation Runner Kuromi 2** central park media
03	**Nanaka 6/17** adv films
04	**Trinity Blood** funimation entertainment
05	**Karas** manga entertainment



	Reader's Most Wanted
01	**IGPX** bandai entertainment
02	**Eureka Seven** bandai entertainment
03	**Karas** manga entertainment
04	**Strawberry Marshmallow** geneon ent.
05	**Saiyuki Reload** adv films

	Reader's Top Five
01	**Samurai Champloo** geneon entertainment
02	**Samurai 7** funimation entertainment
03	**Elfen Lied** adv films
04	**Naruto** viz media
05	**Fullmetal Alchemist** funimation ent.

	Play Magazine Manga Top Five
01	**Death Jam** tokyopop
02	**Reiko The Zombie Shop** dark horse
03	**Boys of Summer** tokyopop
04	**Hyper Police (V5)** tokyopop
05	**Tsubasa (V9)** del rey

Heart of a Rhino

An interview with Marc Ecko

Marc Ecko is an interesting fellow indeed as the first apparel giant to successfully merge active wear with the ever-changing world of pop culture, and pop entertainment. His first foray into gaming; Mark Ecko's Getting Up was met with mixed reviews (critics may not have dug it but its target demo seems awfully happy) however, given how integral he was to the process and how complex modern game design is, for a first venture, he made his Marc, and he's only just getting started...

play: Did you see fashion as a springboard into multimedia from the get-go or is it something that developed as your designs became a part of pop culture?
I thrive on challenge. It's what motivates me to come to work everyday. Being a clothing designer may have afforded me the opportunity to try gaming or publishing or whatever the future might hold for our company, but it's the strength of my team that allows me to really explore opportunities. I wouldn't say that it was always part of some master plan, though. It's much more organic. I simply want to make things that I'm proud of...that are seen as cool and relevant by today's consumer. If they aren't engaged by what we are producing then all of that effort was worthless.

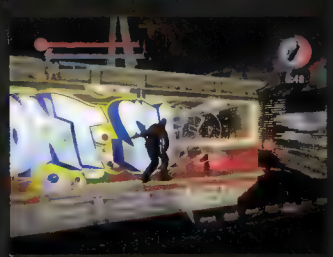
During the early days of the *ecko unltd. clothing line it seemed geared for anyone who wanted to look different/ edgy but things rather rapidly went overwhelmingly hip-hop...
Our customer is a moving target. This is a fluid cycle of popular culture that we live in. My customer is cynical and conscious. That is not unique to my brand; that is the reality of the ever-morphing 18-34 demographic. You can't sum up my customer in one static image. There's no snapshot that is definitive. I feel my customer believes and senses that, and this is core to the success of us being able to break "demographic" boundaries. The tradition of mega-brands of the '80s was to profile their customer in 50 words or less, and one photo. That model is not relevant today. No one wants to be put in a box, whether it's "urban", "skater", whatever.

Your first game followed suit and focused on hip-hop. Not that the gameplay is necessarily bad, but it is somewhat cumbersome compared to the likes of Jet Set Radio or Jet Set Radio Future--the ultimate games in which tagging is a key component. Did you ever consider a more stylized or fantastical setting or was the plan to draw from the hip-hop side of gaming all the way?
Jet Set Radio was a rollerblading game that had no connection to the graffiti world. Visually cool, but very hard to compare to Getting Up in terms of gameplay or the art movement. I think a more apt comparison, in terms of gameplay, is Prince of Persia. We never aimed for a more fantastical setting, because, to me, it was crucial to be respectful to real graffiti culture, so there was a need for some level of realism in the environment. Graffiti, like Hip-Hop, is one of the most influential cultural movements in recent history and, love it or hate it, you have to respect that. I don't have to ignore the depth and history of the movement just because Fortune 500 Companies do when using graf to sell their products.

Were the graffiti artists at all involved in the character design?
Yeah, the artists had input on levels beyond just the artwork. It was more in terms of feedback – they didn't come in and design the characters themselves or anything like that – but we wanted to make sure the game felt real and accurately reflected their lifestyles.

How involved were you with the development of the game?
Heavily involved – some may say too

"Our customer is a moving target. This is a fluid cycle of popular culture that we live in."



Brokeback graffiti courtesy of Trane.

involved! I've had the idea of the world of New Radius for a LONG time, and I had a very clear vision of how the game should play. I'm not an extremely technical guy in terms of game development, so it was a major learning experience working to communicate my ideas. My credentials here are simply that I love games and play them obsessively. I was really happy with how the game turned out. I understand it wasn't to everyone's tastes, but there were a lot of people that "got" what The Collective and myself were trying to do. Could we have done some things differently? Perhaps, but what game developer doesn't feel they could improve the next time around? This was about planting our flag in the ground and setting the stage for future "Getting Up" and non-"Getting Up" gaming projects. It's not a cookie cutter game. It's fun and different, yet a lot of people like to lump it in with games like 50 Cent Bulletproof and 25 to Life. To be honest I didn't like being compared to any "urban" games – even great games like GTA San Andreas – because I don't think the gameplay is very similar.

Did you find that the "politics" of game development clouded your vision? Or did you find the process agreeable?
I enjoyed it. I'm used to the creative process, on a big scale. I live for it and am ready to jump back in.

If you had it to do over again, what would you change?
Now that the game is done and I have played through it countless times, I can pick out all sorts of small things I wish were better. Again, I feel like I could find things to tweak for eternity, I'm sure this is true of anyone involved with the development of a game.

Luke warm reception aside, for a first game you have a lot to be proud of. The game certainly has its merits and much of the art is very inspired. I also think a 360 version would have sold incredibly well. Did Atari consider a 360 overhaul?
Sure, it was considered. We put out the game on PS2, Xbox, PC, and mobile… but we didn't hit 360 simply because of resources. It would be great to have the game out on PSP and DS right now too, but we couldn't do everything – the game was delayed enough as it was! We wanted to reach as many people as possible, so we made our choices accordingly. I'm sure Getting Up would have looked amazing on the 360, just check out the PC version running in high resolutions…

Will you continue creating video games? And if so, will you look to a wider demographic? Perhaps put more of an emphasis on flow and stylized or exaggerated characters?
Absolutely. I have put a lot of resources behind Ecko Games and we have a ton of stuff in the pipeline already. Whether people like it or not, I'll be around the game industry for a long time. We don't have any plan to hit a certain demographic, we are going to make the kinds of games we want to play, that's it. Our business has always been built on the belief that if it feels right, and it makes sense, then it's worth doing…I'm taking the same approach with games. I'm not going to do a bunch of market research to tell me what games I should make.

I don't know if you're familiar with anime such as FLCL, but that style would seem to really suit your earlier designs. As a clothing and game designer/pop culture icon do you see yourself expanding into more areas of design?
I don't limit myself to hip-hop. Never have. Sure we were labeled as "urban" early on, but only because retailers didn't know where else to put us. They said the designs were "too black for white consumers, too white for black consumers" and would never sell. But they did. If you look back to those early days, we were advertising in The Source, but we were also in Transworld Skateboarding and Import Tuner because that's what we were feeling. No different today. We create products that appeal to the broad interests of today's consumers, from *ecko unltd., to Zoo York, to G-Unit, to Avirex, to Cut & Sew. Who knows what I'll get into next. We've always got our eyes open.

"…I feel like I could find things to tweak for eternity, I'm sure this is true of anyone involved with the development of a game."

You're obviously a huge gamer. What are some of your favorite titles?
I've been obsessed with games since childhood. Favorite titles… where do I begin? Atari, Colecovision, I had all of them. All the classics throughout. Yar's Revenge, whatever. The NES Mario games, Sega's Sonic, of course. In the newer generations I remember being immediately hooked by Metal Gear Solid, and on PS2 GTA3. Lately I've been playing a lot of DS games, I've found a lot of them more fun than the Xbox 360 launch titles. Although I have to admit Fight Night 3 is amazing. I could go on for days, I have billions of games. Oh yeah, World of Warcraft is beginning to ruin my life.

So, the big question: Will there be a Getting Up sequel?
Yes, at some point. I feel like there is so much opportunity to do amazing stuff gameplay-wise with this IP.

Do you see clothing design and marketing as a reflection of society or society as the canvas?
Goes both ways. I walk down the street every day in NYC and am inspired by something. How that translates into ideas for clothing is hard to say… sometimes working with my designers, I see something he or she has created and I'm blown away. And of course, who knows where their idea came from? I love looking at the world as a canvas, because I'm an artist and I love seeing my creations out there.

Are you someone who changes or do you have an agenda?
I don't have an agenda – a cynic could say my agenda is making money because I am the head of a big company with my name on it. But I feel like putting out good stuff – giving people the choice to buy inspired, well-designed stuff, rather than crap – is really my goal.

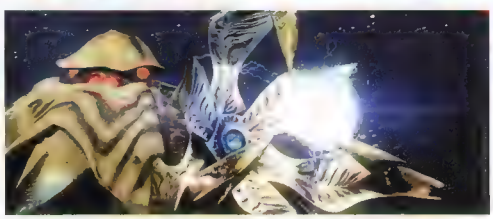
What's the origin of the Rhino icon?
Way back in the day when I was just starting out it seemed like everyone was represented by these graffiti-looking word marks. I got back from a trade show one day and was sitting at my parents' house trying to figure out someway to brand myself. I look up, and there, standing on my dad's shelf was this collection of wood drift rhinos. Wasn't much deeper than that. It said the name without having to say it, just like the Polo pony or Nike swoosh. But over time we grew to appreciate the rhino, its ability to only move forward… the ruggedness… everything about it. It's a huge part of our success and we are very vocal about protecting this majestic animal.

Smells like team spirit.

Negadon

Released By:
Rated:

The arrival of the first completely computer-generated Japanese monster movie, *Negadon* (best bellowed loud in your best MC voice), was met with unbridled enthusiasm at our house—ground zero for all things Godzilla. My 5-year-old son knows every line of every film, and every monster resides somewhere in the house. His Xbox contains one game, Godzilla: Save the Earth, and on any given day you can dig King Ghidorah out of the sofa cushions. I don't know which is more dysfunctional: that I watch just as much or that I steal his Godzilla 2000 every chance I get. If *Negadon* can make it here it can make it anywhere… I think we've watched it about 20 times now. *Negadon* is painfully short, weighing in at a svelte 30 minutes, but it's surprisingly, if not shockingly, well made. The story is poetic, the CGI nearly Square-quality and the designs throughout imaginative and sophisticated. Even the dub is good. I'm not wild about the Negadon monster itself (I was expecting a more mobile combatant) but it would make one helluva shooter boss. If only we had such a tradition for creature features in the US, instead of the plasma-soaked stream of gross-out cinema that passes for entertainment. **Dave Halverson**



Gorillaz Demon Days

Live At The Manchester Opera House

Featuring:
Released By:
Rated:

2D character design is one of life's greatest gifts and Gorillaz has taken it to an entirely new level. *Demon Days Live* is the kind of concert DVD that transforms the music into a movement. While I'd still kill (well, at least maim) for an all-virtual performance by 2D, Murdoc, Russel, and Noodle, this amazing ensemble, sandwiched between massive panels of light, slides, and animation from co-creator Jamie Hewlett and a packed Manchester Opera House, is, in a word, epic. There's even an option to take the visual journey a la carte. As hypnotic as Demon Days already is, accompanied by an orchestra, rousing children's choir and gospel singers, it aspires to an entirely new place. So many layers coming together with so much individual verve is rare, if not unparalleled. The "Demon Days" performance followed by "Hong Kong" is nothing less than a defining moment for the power of musical expression. **Dave Halverson**

Grandma's Boy

Directed by:
Starring:

Released By:
Rated:

I'm not sure exactly who *Grandma's Boy* is trying to lampoon. Middle-aged losers, gamers, video game developers, sex-deprived nerds, stoners, bored old ladies…take your pick. The problem is that it's neither funny or entertaining. It's foul in a pathetic way and makes you wish the producers would never again set foot on a movie set, but that's about it. For a film like this to be at all amusing it needs to exaggerate plausible scenarios. Ron Burgundy: Anchorman for instance—I'm sure many an over-the-hill broadcaster laughed their plastic surgery loose watching that one. But *Grandma's Boy* depicts a game studio run by testers, along with one "genius" creator/programmer with a Matrix complex and proclivity for robot speak, where the main activity is break-room game challenges between the old testers and the young testers. And then they smoke pot…and sleep with Shirley Jones, jerk-off, and crap in their pants. Oh and there's a hot (to them) blonde (Linda Cardellini a.k.a. Velma from Scooby Doo with bleached hair) who's hired to get the game out on time. Think Grandma is going to find dickweed's pot and brew it up with the ladies' tea? Maybe segue into a wild party full of punkers, bikers and old-person-sex? Chapter skip! The awkwardness of Kevin Nealon (apparently game execs are Zen Buddhist head-cases by the way) carrying on about bit-mapping and collision detection is only compounded by the sad fact that his career has sunk so low, and a cameo by David Spade is so utterly horrific it makes you pine for *Joe Dirt*. Some people should die on SNL. The monkey saves this one from F-town. **D Halverson**

Hostel

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

Lurid and morbid, cheap and senseless, fashioned to mainline the shock straight into your veins —here's a blueprint for the new horror porn—*Hostel* can't possibly be called a good movie. I kind of liked it. You look away in disgust with one eye while soaking in the skillfully staged scenes of torture and death as a group of college kids trek through Eastern Europe, settling on a hostel in Slovakia, where women cavort around naked in the co-ed steam rooms and share the apartment next door. It would seem their good looks are the devil's charm sent to lure hapless travelers into an underground torture chamber, established to entertain rich players who get to act out their sickest fantasies of death. At least they tried to layer in a semblance of social commentary over the buzz of the hacksaws grinding away. **Brady Fiechter**

BACK OF THE BOOK

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

The talk of the town...

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